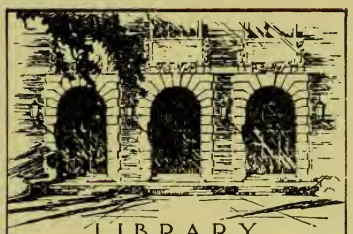
A WOMAN'S REQUITAL

HELEN DICKENS



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A WOMAN'S REQUITAL.

A Novel.

BY

HELEN DICKENS,

AUTHOR OF "MARRIED AT LAST," "THE MILL WHEEL," "WILD WOOD," "THE HOME OF FAITH."

"Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceedingly small;
Though with patience He stands waiting,
With exactness grinds He all."

LONGFELLOW.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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A WOMAN'S REQUITAL.

CHAPTER I.

"Love for a whole life long!
When was that sung?"

He sat and wept for his mother like any baby, particularly after some brandy and water. Mary took little notice of him, and I saw her contempt when he began in a silly lisping way to "Mary dear" her.

She did her best to get him to attend to business; but he seemed to have the knack of frittering his time away. In the middle

of the morning he would come in complaining of headache, and ask for wine. Mary's brows would contract, and she complied with the request very reluctantly.

During the day Mr. Leete would come in asking for Peter, who divided his time between the sideboard and the cage in the garden where he kept his game fowls.

It was during one of these morning inroads that he honoured me by laying at my feet his elegant person and poverty. He had not a penny, and unless his father provided for him he would be a pauper all his life.

His love affairs were well known to me; he was continually finding some adorable creature to whom he presented a ring or locket. His mother had been his confidant. Now he had no resource but to tell Mary, his brain being too shallow

to contain such a gigantic project as well as his name and address.

Laughter would have been heartless in a house of mourning, or I should have given vent to my amusement in the poor thing's face. I declined the proposal as gravely as I could, and escaped from the room. Very shortly afterwards Mary joined me. Dear Peter had told her of his disappointment, and predicted for himself a speedy and touching death.

Mary laughed heartily.

"You don't know the trouble Peter's love affairs are to me, Grace. I wish someone would marry him, but I cannot think anyone foolish enough will ever be found."

I agreed with her.

It was some time before I met Mr. Peter Leete again. My duties occupied

my time fully, and my heart drew homewards more than ever.

Just a week before Easter, Mr. Leete came to see me. I liked this man much. I thought that in a great trouble I could unburden my mind to Mary's father.

After a little general conversation he said:

"Miss Sharland, I am in a bit of a fix. Annie is not strong, and Weston says a change of air is necessary. She cannot go alone, and I cannot spare time to take her. I had a long talk with Mary this morning about going with her sister, and she refused to do so most decidedly.

"'I will not go with Annie alone, papa; we do not get on well. And you would be miserable here by yourself, papa, with only the boys. Try and find Annie a companion.'

"The only companion I care to have for her is you, Miss Sharland, and perhaps you would not object to spending a little time at Brighton. When are your holidays."

"Easter is soon, and then I have about a fortnight."

"Will you consider my proposal, my dear ?"

"Yes, Mr. Leete I will, and write you my decision."

I not only considered the matter myself, but mentioned it to Mr. Lovering, and it was decided that I should go.

I found, greatly to my joy, that Mr. Lovering had an excellent opinion of Mr. Leete ; but considered he had made a mistake in the management of his family.

To Brighton we accordingly repaired,

and took up our position in comfortable apartments on the parade.

Annie was in her glory, and became, owing to excitement, tolerably intelligent.

There were plenty of visitors, of whom the Israelites made the greatest appearance and displayed the most wealth.

Luckily for me, Annie's stupidity did not weary me very much, because she occupied herself with fancy work when indoors.

Exercise she disliked, and often begged me to walk alone.

The aquarium was a great attraction to me, as well as other people, and thither I bent my steps this Tuesday morning.

CHAPTER II.

"Ever drifting, drifting, drifting,
On the shifting
Currents of the restless main
Till in sheltered coves, reaches
Of sandy beaches,
All have found repose again."

It was a bright fresh clear day, and the smell of the salt sea was pleasant to me.

There was to be a grand concert that evening, and fresh plants were being arranged.

This induced every person who came that way to remain and gaze.

Not caring for a crowd, I moved on and took my seat in a far shady cool corner, opposite some cases of shell-fish, prettily arranged with rocks and sea-weed.

Naturally I thought of the being I loved best in the world. He had not written. We agreed that a correspondence under the circumstances would be injudicious. I was not unhappy. True love does not diminish by separation.

My life, though peaceful enough to beholders, had been interrupted by storms, and now that my craft was about to be moored into a harbour of refuge I allowed myself the privilege of looking back.

My heart ached at past sorrows, and I regretted my dead energy and courage. I knew that I could never again do what I had done—my senses had numbed half my nerve. It is a mockery to

congratulate a woman when she has conquered and earned the world's commendation.

By that time her interest is dead, and the glory over which others rejoice makes her shudder. Every heart knows its own bitterness, and no bitterness is keener than the knowledge that your race is nearly run before you are any age to speak of.

The weariness of heart and brain is a debility for which there is no cure.

A sigh escaped me, and it had scarcely died ere my hand was taken, and I was called by many endearing names.

I was too glad to hide my feelings, and if twenty people had been there I should have kissed the big smiling mouth just the same.

"What a fierce little love it is! Have you wanted me, Grace?"

"A thousand times. But—what have you come for?"

"To see you, Grace. There is a peculiar desire on the part of my feet to follow in the track of yours, accompanied by a harassing sensation at the left side of my waistcoat, which denotes that we are happier together than apart."

"We? why we? I have made no complaint!"

"True, you have not. You would not gratify me sufficiently by making any such spontaneous confession. Grace, I could wish you were less cautious, more quick-blooded and impulsive."

"And then, sir?"

"I might find a suggestion I am about to make more readily agreed to."

"Try, sir. If there is reason and justice

in the proposal, you will not find me tardy at acquiescing."

"That is pressing the point. If! That analytical propensity of yours will in all probability test the proposition and find it diluted, and on those grounds reject it."

"It is unlike you to advise hasty and careless judgment."

"Ah! already you are on the alert. Your eye says, 'You have a motive in view, William.'"

"And you have?"

"I have."

"William, you know that your happiness is mine."

"Is it? We will not decide upon that point until you hear what I have to say."

He kept me by his side, holding my hand.

"Grace, when a man reaches my time of life, he does not love in the lukewarm-fashion of seventeen. At that age, change and time work marvels; at mine the object coveted must be possessed, as already its influence has altered the current of his being. The promise of possession is fair enough, but immediate possession does away with all doubt. Before I saw you I was like many another man, just existing, and not sufficiently interested in anyone to be moved by their sayings or doings. Now all is different, and you have wrought the change. You make my happiness, my interest in life—do I make yours?"

"Yes."

"Then here is my suggestion, that we marry."

"I promised to marry you, William."

"I know, and I wish to have that promise realised, Grace."

I was not averse to letting him see that his affection comprised my whole happiness. I had the idea that to hide it might grieve him.

Since those days I have proved how unnecessary was my precaution, and how foolish it is to stake all on frail humanity. Experience, however, is only obtained through suffering, and those who would be wise must endure.

My silence he attributed to unwillingness to marry at once.

"Grace, you promised in the church that night that *whenever* I asked you you would be my wife."

"I know I did; and I am ready to fulfil it."

"A woman of her word is worth her

weight in gold. I would not part with you for it!"

His harsh love did not terrify me—it attracted me. Had he uttered silly, spoony phrases, and followed me like a lap-dog, I should have scorned and repelled him. His passionate face and utterance seemed to me typical of man's love, and becoming to a strong, reserved nature.

My own affection was only in one degree less. I could not have got up scenes or paraded my feelings for worlds. It was of his peculiar temperament that I was proud.

To have been loved by a man to whom love was common would have found no favour in my sight—produced no response. But to gain the ascendency over a nature that had few equals, either good

or bad, was a victory of which any woman might well be proud.

Our plans were soon formed.

The visit to Brighton expired that day week, and we were supposed to return home on the following one.

According to Mr. Lovering's directions, I stated my intention of proceeding to visit Mr. Cartland, instead of returning to Holland with Annie.

To tell a lie was repugnant to me; and I said so to Mr. Lovering.

He laughed at me.

I hated this lie: it was like taking the devil's wages, and I thought if some evil befell me it would serve me right, for I was acting against my conscience. Nothing did happen to me.

By my advice he kept out of Annie Leete's sight, and on the following Tues-

day I left the house ere Annie was down, took a cab, drove to the church, and was married.

I had a black dress and bonnet on, and I met a funeral.

The ceremony over, I left Mr. Lovering and returned to the lodgings. I assisted Annie to pack, walked with her, stood before the very tank where I had promised to be a wife that day week.

I wondered whether the fishes, gliding in the blue-green water amongst the sham rocks and seaweed, knew what I had done. I had taken the one irrevocable step in a lifetime, and sought no one's counsel ere doing it.

On the Wednesday, Annie Leete went home, and I took my way to the station an hour after. There I joined my husband.

Good Mr. Cartland! he would have been glad to see me for my mother's sake, and his wife would have liked me for his.

Not to them did I go.

CHAPTER III.

"Hence be this new work assigned,
And ordered by the master mind!"

We drove past their house in the park several times, but saw no signs of its master. The season, with its many attractions, failed to draw Mr. Cartland from his musty chambers.

No doubt one of the numerous, neat equipages we constantly met contained the mistress of that charming house across the park. I had never been used to town life, and I soon tired of the heat and bustle.

"Can we go into the country, William?" I ask, "one day, when we are going for a drive."

"Yes. We will go into the country to-day, if you like, Grace."

We went to the inn at the foot of Box Hill. I liked it, liked the shadow of the hill thrown into the garden, liked the stream that trickled and purled under the bridge across the road.

The house was quiet, excepting when parties came for the day, or pedestrians stopped to drink at the bar.

I was happy. The peacefulness of the place rested my brain, and I grew more reconciled to the parting. We were to return to Holland in our old characters of tenant and landlord.

In a little time William would have broken the news to his sisters, and in-

stalled them in another house some seven miles from the Manor. Then I was to take my place as his wife. It was very simple—just to have patience and wait.

I was to give up teaching, and say I was going to be married.

This arrangement I did not approve of. I knew I should not like an idle life, and the time while waiting would not seem so long if I occupied it.

I did not regret having married hastily and secretly. I loved my husband too much to regret anything. We wandered about the leafy lanes, and visited every place of any note.

The landlady of the inn was a young, pretty creature, the landlord considerably older and uglier. Her unhappiness was apparent, and the incessant wailing of her

sickly baby told very plainly of the mother's previous disquietude.

Her lips quivered as she described the dreariness of the place in the winter. They shut up all the house but the bar part, and I could picture her shivering, yet afraid to speak, as the blast blew down from the hill, and her big, brutish husband snored.

Poor thing! there was a story there; a secret to be kept. William laughed at my interest in the woman, and suggested that she would become reconciled to her lot. I did not agree with him. I did not make a point of always agreeing with my husband, after the fashion of most new wives.

Men like being contradicted sometimes, especially by a woman who has confidence in her own judgment.

People did not take us for a newly-married couple; we were too independent and companionable for that.

The honeymoon waned; only two more days and then we parted, and my wedding-ring must be hung round my neck on a piece of ribbon.

William's face wore the old expression of resistance, a silent challenge that no one with an atom of sense would be in a hurry to accept.

I was sitting at the window listening to the thrush's evening song in the elder-trees, and my eyes, raised to one particular pane of glass, noticed scratches thereon. Absently I studied them, and presently spelt out a name: "Rose Russell."

"William!" I called; "here's such a pretty name written on this window."

"Your own, I suppose? Are you going

to ornament the old farm windows similarly, Grace?"

He drew me on to his knee.

"My dear William, your wife is not romantic. Do you see it?"

"No."

"I forgot; very likely you can't—you are old. When you are *quite* blind, William, I will lend you my eyes. It is right for young and old to marry, then they are not decrepid together."

"Very nice, indeed, madam; but I fancy you will not get many to endorse your opinion."

"We are happy, William, and what on all the earth should I have done with a young husband? He would have worried the life out of me, and danced attendance upon somebody else's wife. Don't you think that a pretty name?"

"I have not heard it yet."

"Then hear now, 'Rose Russell.'"

I can remember this minute, as if yesterday, the fearful cry, the bound that threw me against the wall, and the starting eyes that were lifted in terror to the window. I was stunned.

"William! William! are you ill?" I screamed.

The livid face relaxed, the white lips smiled, and, with a gasping sigh, he encircled me with trembling arms, and strove to quiet me.

"Be calm, Grace, my darling; do not bring in the household. I shall be quite well again directly."

How he shook! how he panted!

My poor husband! In a few moments I ventured to inquire if he felt better, and the nature of his ailment.

"Yes, dear, quite better. I am sorry I frightened you, but it came so suddenly. I hurt my side when that pony knocked me down some few years since, and at times I feel the effects. It is nothing; forget it, Grace!"

I could not. It was queer; he had been in perfect health and spirits not a second before. The trembling did not subside for a long time, and through the night he scarcely slept. It was fancy; my brain was fevered, doubtless, yet I could have sworn that my husband's voice calling, "Rose! Rose!" awoke me out of a troubled dream. He was awake, so it could not have been.

In the morning our sitting-room was changed.

"Why, what can have induced them to do this?" I exclaimed; "they ought to

have asked us if we were agreeable to the alteration."

"It is my doing, Grace. I asked them to put us into another room."

This settled the subject.

The morning was cloudy and threatened to rain, but William, skilled in foretelling the elements' intentions, said no; that the gloom would disperse, and we might venture to the very top of the hill.

When I came down, dressed for walking, I found my husband in earnest conversation with the landlady.

His back was towards me.

"And you cannot call to mind any of your visitors, Mrs. Pickford?"

"No, sir; but I have not been here long. I am Mr. Pickford's second wife."

"Oh, indeed!"

I did not wish to keep him in ignorance

of my presence longer—why, I did not know.

I touched him.

He turned sharply, terror and rage imprinted on his face.

"Grace, pray do not repeat that experiment; I object to being startled."

It was the first objection he had ever made to anything I had done.

A retort was on my lips, but I saw that he was agitated, and struggling to hide it, so I said nothing.

He did not speak until we were three parts up the hill.

"Of what are you thinking, Grace?"

"Of you."

"Nothing to my detriment, I hope? I can only throw myself on your mercy; my late ill-temper was, I know, very objectionable."

"Oh! William, it is not of your temper I was thinking, but of the cause of it."

"Come, my dear Grace, you bewilder me."

"Then your illness, if you prefer that expression."

"Yes, to be sure, I understand. And what conclusion have you arrived at? What part of me is affected in your opinion?'

"You are making fun, William. Don't, please don't. I feel so sad. Supposing you are ill? Your sisters will not let me into the room, and I shall go mad."

"I am not going to be ill, my dear, don't you alarm yourself. It is a long time since I felt anything of the kind. Oblige me by not alluding to it again."

A wife's duty is to obey, and I obeyed. The time for separation approached, and

every moment made it harder. How could I conceal my feelings, and meet my husband as a stranger? It had been difficult to treat him as an acquaintance when I loved him, during all that long silent time. What should I do without the tenderness, the loving care and companionship?

My heart turned coward; and my husband, looking into my face, read my thoughts.

He comforted me.

The next day we parted, after prolonging the bitter moment with extraordinary ingenuity.

CHAPTER IV.

"When hearts have once mingled
Love first leaves the well-built nest,
The weak one is singled
To endure what it once possest."

I RETURNED first: Mr. Lovering would remain in London a day or two longer, to disarm suspicion.

The miserable old rattletrap of a fly from the station crawled at a snail's pace up the hill, the sunlight revealing all the imperfections of the dirty moth-eaten machine.

Up Holland was steeped in sunshine;

the garden was full of the odour of early flowers and herbs. In the road I saw Mrs. Duckworth and her husband. They bowed very condescendingly.

I thought how one peep at the slender hoop of gold hanging round my neck would infuse more geniality and respect into their manner.

And I smiled partly at the thought, partly at Peggy.

"How are you, Miss Grace; arn't we just glad to have you back though!"

I gave her to understand I was glad to return—I could not say it. When unpacking, I came upon the stock of money William had given me—fifty pounds. I was never to be short of pocket-money again, never to want for anything any more.

Peggy's call to supper roused me from

my reverie, and I hastened down, not caring any longer to indulge in such thoughts. My happiness was too great. I feared what I could not tell; but it sent a chill to my heart, so lately thrilling with love. It was a warm evening, and I strolled out, choosing the path by the wood leading to my home. The air was full of the song of birds, it was one of the very brightest of evenings, and yet to me there was a darkness, a shadow wherever I looked.

I met two of the servants from the Manor—they bowed most respectfully. My fame as an actress had reached the servants' hall, and made me of some consequence in their eyes.

I now found I was very near the Manor, and at once retraced my steps.

He was not there—why need I trouble

to go. Again the chill at my heart, and I turned in terror. I decided that my secret was too much for me, and the sooner I got the better of such fancies the more sensible it would be.

For the first time I dreaded my own thoughts. Now that I had come back to my old home, the scene of my struggle for a living, I trembled at what I had done.

I was an impostor. Where was the feeling of courage that had supported me when I first came, a poor proud orphan? It had fled. I was a coward now, now that my name as a teacher insured me an income as long as I could earn it. My courage faded before the knowledge that I had practised a deception.

I was not on good terms with myself. A secret marriage. As I whispered it

my face flushed. It was not what I, Grace Sharland, should have done. I ought to have guarded my name, my conscience. I might have known it would reproach me.

What had I been about, to lower my intellect sufficiently to permit myself to be overruled in a matter concerning my honour? I would have given half my life to undo what I had done, as I stood alone in the room that night. Never say evil comes unheralded. I shivered and panted beneath the weight that was crushing me—a weight that had neither shape nor name; it existed alone in my imagination.

My brow was damp as I opened the door to rush to Peggy, anywhere away from my own thoughts. I was met by a whine of affection, and a cold nose was slipped into my hand.

It was Rap, his dog. What instinct could have led the dog to me? It seemed as though this brute, dumb to all else, knew of the link between us. I embraced him—he had come in the nick of time.

How foolish I had been; my husband was true, high-minded, the soul of honour—our marriage would only be kept secret a little while. Surely I did not doubt the man I had married? No, no!

With the great rough head between my hands I grew calmer, and reasoned myself into a more comfortable mood.

When I released him, every doubt had gone. It proved, however, that I congratulated myself too early.

My evil genius was still lurking in the recesses of my brain, and only awaited the arrival of sleep to recommence the torture.

My slumber was broken until towards daybreak: then I fell into so deep a sleep that not even my sufferings could awaken me.

I stood before a crowd of people, an offending, accused woman. They would not come near me, nor suffer me to approach them. Lips were curled in scorn, fingers pointed at me in derision. I strove to speak, to defend myself, and I could not. *I was dumb.* Not a sound could I utter.

Whatever my crime, surely my punishment was its equal in severity.

I struggled into wakefulness almost convulsed; probably a second more and I should have succumbed to the fit my agonised brain was invoking. I had neither sight nor sense for a time. Then, as the vessels in my brain resumed their original size, and the congealed blood cir-

culated, my reason regained its power, and I heard the crowing of the cocks, the lowing of the cows. It was getting light. I got up and crawled to the window. I was weak and sore like any poor beaten creature. I opened it, and lay with my head on the sill. I could not shake off the terror that again oppressed me.

Eagerly I sought the presence of some living creature—I could not endure my own thoughts. I went into the yard. The men were getting ready to go out. John was feeding the pigs and issuing directions. They seemed amazed to see me so early.

Peggy was lighting the fire. I busied myself indoors, and as the time approached, casting anxious glances towards the road, hoping to see the postman.

My longing was at length satisfied. I had a letter—an invitation bidding me to Lucy Leete's marriage. It was to be extremely quiet, owing to their recent bereavement.

I accepted. I liked the Leetes.

CHAPTER V.

"Like the swell of some sweet tune,
Morning rises into noon,
May glides onward into June."

I HAD been home four days when the master came. I heard his voice in the barn, and saw his cautious glances when he neared the house. My eyes were full of tears, and I had to leave the kitchen.

Surely he would not go away without coming in. It was too hard to imagine. My self-possession was deserting me. I loved my husband as few wives love.

He came at last, and Peggy must have

been more innocent than any other woman, or she would have thought the greeting unnecessarily constrained. But only until the door was shut: then his affection found vent in words and actions.

I besought him to be prudent. He laughed and defied prudence.

I was his wife, his very own darling, etc.—he said, just what all men say.

It was the old old story, that comes new once to the most learned woman. And I listened and believed, as I hope every woman will, as I hope you have done, reader.

Love is the one ennobling passion of a life. No woman is tempered for adversity till her heart has passed through the furnace of doubt.

Try to live unloved, unloving? You will soon weary of existence, or give your-

self over to the worship of some idol—money, ambition, fashion. Better love some other creature who may benefit by and reward your fidelity.

Even unrequited affection is not without its advantages. It is refining and subduing, beautifies the afflicted, renders them unselfish, patient, and henceforth proof to the evils and dangers of humanity.

I listened, and believed all the earnest protestations he made, and returned his caresses. It was entrancing. In his repulsive visage I saw beauty, in his harsh tones I heard music.

How Satan must have laughed as he looked on, and twitted the angels at having outwitted them!

I could laugh myself, only that—but never mind. We will not anticipate evil,

let us for this once be happy and—believe. Never had an hour seemed so short. When he went he took my heart away with him.

By degrees I became accustomed to these visits, and we managed to utter no small amount of love in the time allotted for us to see each other. Then we had accidental meetings in the lanes, about the farm, on the way to the station; and my life was pleasant enough, nothwithstanding the secret that rather weighed upon me when in a reflective mood.

Lucy Leete's marriage day arrived, and I went in a bewitching toilet of mauve, because William wished it, and gave me twenty pounds to pay for it.

"It is too much, I shall not spend half of it."

"You will, you must. Remember you

are now my wife, no longer independent Miss Sharland. How proud you were, Grace, and how sarcastic! You vexed me at times. Only I saw that behind all that there was a sad yearning in the brave heart for love and companionship. No other woman could have bewitched me as you did. You stabbed me cruelly with that barbed tongue of yours, and then looking up five seconds after, drew the wound together with the tenderest glance, making me more in love with you than ever. Grace, what made you behave so?"

I laughed. The recollections of my own struggles and perplexities were vivid enough.

"I could not be sure that you cared for me, William; and you were so strange —you spoke and acted sometimes as if contrary to your desire."

"Really? Remember that, Grace, keep it in your memory. It will convince you that I *did* make an attempt to find the straight path; also, one day, enable you to estimate the struggle that *was* going on when I appeared most repulsive."

"Now you are speaking in riddles, and I feel almost as much provoked as I used to do when you snubbed me, or persisted in naming your loves. One was named 'Dora.' How often *were* you in love, pray?"

"Twenty times, perhaps, in love, or what passed for it. Supposing we let those ladies rest—they were not of your order."

"I suspect not. They believed at once, and flattered you perpetually. Now I did neither one nor the other. I cannot think what made you care for me."

"Nor I. Your impatience and evident

wish to avoid me pricked my vanity, roused my curiosity to know more of you, and when I knew that much, it was not enough. There is something peculiarly attractive about you, Grace. You are not lovely, nor given to any display of emotion or affection; but you are the sort of woman whom a man having once cared for can never forget. *I* tried hard to forget you—make a note of that—and failed. Tell me," he added almost directly, "do you like the Leetes?"

"Yes, very much. Do you?"

"Oh yes! But I know very little of them, and I scarcely think they are suitable friends for—my wife."

My lips tightened. I had an aversion to considering such matters. I felt that I could hold my own—I had always done so, and I did not like taking refuge behind

the screens society sets up for its poor defence.

The Leetes were nice, homely, well-principled people, and they had been kind to me. There was the head and front of the whole matter.

My nature was divided thus: I either loved or hated, liked or disliked.

A kindness I never forgot, and the poorest of God's creatures might make me a debtor for life by one genuine act of liberality and good-nature.

But a slight, the deliberate denial of a benefit, however small, planted in my memory a scorn, a spirit of contemptuous repugnance, that neither time nor endeavour could extract.

At the Leetes' hands I had received many benefits, much comfort. I had been warmed and fed, cheered with kind words.

And I had known they were in earnest. There was not sufficient manner about them to conceal hypocrisy.

Millers they might be, but in John Leete's breast there beat a heart noble enough to belong to a king.

I could not help being surprised at Mr. Lovering. I supposed him above such quibbles.

"You have made your discovery too late, William, and at the same time amazed me not a little. I thought you indifferent to such trifles. I am sorry to find you are not, as I could never do violence to my feelings sufficiently to give the Leetes what is termed the 'cold shoulder.' When anything of that sort is to be done you must do it yourself; and what is more, dispense with my assistance."

"My dear child, I am not asking you

to give the Leetes up—I merely made a remark."

"I know that, but a remark very often may be read two ways."

"And you have the knack of reading the wrong one, eh ?"

"I generally select the most unpleasant, for that, hitherto, has always been intended for me."

"Hitherto, perhaps, but not henceforth, my darling. Go to the Leetes and enjoy yourself—in spirit I shall be with you."

CHAPTER VI.

"Light so low upon earth,
You send a flash to the sun.
Here is the golden close of love,
All my wooing is done."

To the wedding I went early enough to dress the bride, and help Mary, who worked body and brain to supply the mother's place.

"When papa and I are alone, Miss Sharland, we shall be so happy."

"Alone, Mary?" I questioned; "how about your brothers?"

She smiled scornfully.

"Their bodies will be here of course, but their small stock of brains will be scattered as usual, so I reckon very little upon such companionship. Sometimes I can see right inside papa's mind; I did the other evening, and told him his thoughts."

"He may not like that, Mary."

"He will. When they are unpleasant ones I shall not utter them."

All was ready in good time, and we stood at the window facing the old-fashioned garden. The mill was stopped; Mr. Leete had given a holiday. It was the first wedding in the family. Lucy was pretty and tearful; she made little pretensions of regret at leaving her home, and Mary I knew rejoiced at her going.

I looked at the brave young girl with her plain earnest face, and wondered when she would marry.

Something whispered to me "Never." I was startled, and looked again. This time I agreed with the whisper. It would be never. Mary Leete had not the face to attract one man in a hundred. There was at times too much acrimony in her utterance to find favour.

She would be left like many another woman, who, if fate had only sent the man who could manage her, would have made an exemplary wife and mother.

The wedding was very quiet, and soon the small party broke up.

Mr. and Mrs. Ross left early, and the boys went off to their several pastimes.

Mr. Leete, Mary, and I, sat by the open window talking. The garden was large, and well stocked with trees, hiding the walls, and old white mill that stood on the river's bank.

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The house had been in the Leete family for many many years, and was the oldest in Danver.

Mr. Leete was much changed, and followed Mary with his eyes, I thought, fearfully. Presently he uttered his thoughts—Mary had been summoned indoors :

"I hope some one will tell me if ever I impose upon that child, or allow others to do it. She is far too willing and capable. I wish I had a son as earnest and industrious."

"Do not trouble, Mr. Leete; Mary is able to defend herself, and I do not believe she would be half so happy with nothing to do. You will find her all anyone could desire, or I am much mistaken."

"I agree with you. Lucy's marriage

takes a load off my mind. Life is precarious. But for Mary I have no fears. She will always be able to help herself. My anxiety is lest her own family should thoughtlessly require too much of her, and forget her age. Already I have noticed the constant cry for 'Mary,' when anything was needed; and her prompt way of settling matters and setting things to rights must increase the demands."

"Depend upon it, Mary will not undertake too much. Of one thing I am sure, nothing would so seriously distress Mary as to think you needed anything she could supply, or felt neglected. Her one idea is to make up for her mother's loss."

"Good child! a right good child! Well, well, I must not get too anxious, or she will fancy I do not trust her."

Further conversation was stopped by Mary, who advanced with smiling face.

"Just imagine, papa! Mr. Lovering has sent Lucy such a splendid present. A case of silver salt-cellars. How pleased she will be!"

My heart bounded. My husband was generous, a quality I admired above every other; and he had not told me of his intention on purpose to surprise me.

My praises did not sound very genuine, for I was afraid of letting my heart dictate too much and jeopardise my secret.

I agreed, naturally, that he was very kind, etc.

"I did not expect anything from him. We certainly are well acquainted. I have ground his corn many a year, as well as his father's before him. The name of Lovering has been on the mill books many a year. But I little thought he would send Lucy a present. However, I take

it very kindly, I doubt not that it is a well-meant attention."

"Papa!" exclaimed Mary, drawing her chair nearer, as if for a confidence, "I like Mr. Lovering."

Mentally, I "God blessed" her.

"Do you? That is what your mother never did, Mary. She had a rather unreasonable dislike to Will Lovering, for her suspicion never was proved."

"What suspicion? Tell us, papa."

"Another time, Mary. I must go to the mill; I have letters to write, and several accounts to square. Peter I know is not there."

"He ought to be, papa."

"Mary!"

"Papa, I must say it, because it pulls so at my heart. He ought to be there. He is always shirking his duty, and idling

his time; he will be ruined if it goes on—good-for-nothing!"

Mr. Leete made no reply, but walked away.

"How could you say that, Mary!"

"Really I hardly know, Miss Sharland; I never thought whether it was, or was not, my duty to speak. It is some one's, it is true, and papa knows it."

"Very likely; let me give you a word of advice. Never attempt to keep guard over other people's actions or possessions. It is the most thankless office, and all the reward you will ever receive for your endeavours will be abuse. Your brother won't thank you for having an eye to his welfare, and your father would just as soon you did not see your brother's failings."

"Then he will grow up a worthless

fellow, knowing nothing, for he is just frittering his time away, and playing at being a miller."

"No doubt. Men are nearly all self-conceited, selfish cowards, but they contrive to impose upon the world in general, and women in particular."

"I should like to see the man capable of imposing upon you, Miss Sharland, though you are wonderfully good-natured. Guess what I heard the other day? A story of Mr. Lovering's meanness."

"What about?"

"Some fruit in a garden. He owns a farm on the other side of Danver, and he has let the house to a widow lady; her husband was a doctor in the town several years. It is well known she is poor, and he actually told her not to touch the fruit in the orchard that nearly surrounds

the house. One day the servant took upon herself to gather half-a-dozen gooseberries, and he or some of his family saw her, and he went and told Mrs. Crossfield. What makes it richer, is that he requested her to send the cottagers out whenever they came in. If true, it is the meanest action I ever heard of."

I turned my head away, conscious that my face was burning with shame. Could it be true? To deprive a poor woman of a handful of fruit.

To me he had been generous: had that generosity been prompted by a selfish motive? Was he crafty?

The pain this thought gave me I cannot describe, for I held a mean cunning person in such contempt and horror, that to know I was in that person's power terrified me.

"Who told you this story, Mary?"

"Miss Webster, the dressmaker; she says it is known all over Danver. I don't believe it, and I told her so."

"You did quite right; I hardly credit it myself."

"Miss Sharland, if ever I love anyone more than papa, it will be some one like Mr. Lovering."

I burst out laughing.

"Is he then so handsome?"

"That is not it, though he is quite as handsome as I care for a man to be. I should not wish to marry a perfect picture, such as one reads about. He fascinates me; I could obey him, and forgive him his faults. I could not dislike him if I wanted to. I wonder why mamma did; I must know."

I began to feel rather alarmed. Sup-

posing she fell in love with him unbidden? Of course it would not kill her, but hers was exactly the heart to carry a lasting scar upon it.

"If you are wise, Mary, you will not trouble yourself about Mr. Lovering. He is very nice no doubt, and for all we know may be proportionately wicked."

"Well," she retorted, "I conclude we *all* sin more or less; but I believe that some manage to deceive better than others, and for a given time pass for better than their brethren. I will think no evil of Mr. Lovering until I *know* it."

With a decision that admitted of no attempt to unsettle, Miss Mary got tea for her papa and me, and went about her work with as much earnestness and alacrity as if it had been a matter of the greatest consequence.

Her dress she looped over her arm, and as I watched I could not help being struck by the promise of health and courage her fine form and intelligent face gave. She seemed possessed of every quality the others lacked. She had an excellent constitution, a fine nerve in emergencies, even temper, determination, and a powerful intellect. Mary Leete was a remarkable woman.

The evening passed cheerfully and pleasantly; Mary and her father talking in a clever strain flavoured with the keenest humour, and making the moments fly.

Some people are charming at fireside conversations, and Mary was one. It was a pleasure to listen, and note the expressive countenance kindle and soften according to the subject discussed.

I thought then, that such a mind was a

rare possession, a ceaseless source of instruction and interest. I know now that to only one in every thousand is such a treasure given, and those who can claim kinship with the holder thereof may reckon themselves fortunate people.

Before leaving I asked Mr. Leete and Mary to come and take tea with me the following day.

CHAPTER VII.

"I saw the branches of the trees
Bend down thy touch to meet,
The clover-blossoms in the grass
Rise up to kiss thy feet."

The corn was standing thick and ripe—harvest was beginning. To me it is the pleasantest season though the saddest, for then I, like the farmers, reaped what I had sown; and God knows my measure was brimming over.

Mary and her father drove over about five, and we had tea; such a tea as only a farm-house can give. I was proud of

my home, its simplicity and liberality was uncommon, and wonderfully pleasing to strangers.

We went into the garden, the yard, the fields. I saw nothing of my husband. I did not want to meet him for fear my eyes betrayed me. I loved him better than my own life, and never was more conscious of it than this evening.

"Splendid crops," said Mr. Leete. "Your landlord cultivates his land to perfection, Miss Sharland. He must make a quantity of money, he is so successful."

"Who will he leave it to?" marvelled Mary. "Those old ladies have quite enough; besides they ought to die first, and leave theirs to him. By the way, papa, tell me why mamma never liked Mr. Lovering?"

We were at the remotest end of the rick-

yard, the meadows lay green and expansive before us, flanked by the thick woods. Away to the left could be seen a curl of smoke indicating the whereabouts of the Manor, and behind it the spire of Holland Church.

It was a pleasant prospect, denoting industry and wealth, and my heart fluttered when I recollected how nearly allied I was to everything, how rich in even a monetary sense.

My eyes, used to seeking over fields for the form they loved, caught sight of him now, as he came down the pasture meadow. Some young calves had been put there, and he was looking at them.

He was in a reflective mood, for he sat on a rail and became as immovable as the wood.

My companions did not see him, or

if they did, took him for some ploughman.

"Miss Sharland!"

"Yes, Mr. Leete."

He was smiling at me, and knotting a straw he had drawn out of a rick.

"Are you curious to hear the cause of my wife's dislike of Mr. Lovering?"

"Not very. It can matter nothing to me."

"So I know now, but my wife at one time thought differently."

"How?"

"In this way. She held your landlord to be a wicked, dangerous man, and you are an attractive young lady. You *might* have fallen in love with him, and in that case his past life would have had an interest for you."

It *had* an interest. My heart was struggling to beat equally.

What of his past life?

I conquered my fear, and asked:

"Is there anything unpleasant connected with Mr. Lovering's past life."

"I cannot tell you that; my knowledge of the circumstance begins and ends with a suspicion of my late wife's. Whether true or untrue, it caused her to dislike Mr. Lovering as I never knew her to dislike any other person, for hers was a particularly sweet nature."

"Yes, papa," replied Mary; "but you know some of those natures brood over and nurse an idea until it becomes a fact, and that, I think, is scarcely just. Tell us what it was, then we can judge."

I turned towards the meadow. He was still sitting on the rail, unconscious that I, his wife, was about to pass judgment upon him.

Dreading what might come, I breathed a prayer in my heart, that I might love him no less, that no whispering tongue should rob me of my belief in him. I remained looking at the still figure. Mr. Leete's voice roused me.

"Then judge. When your mother and I were young married people, Mr. Lovering was a young fellow of perhaps twenty-two or three, and giving his father some little trouble on account of his extravagance and wildness. He was always going abroad, and very often did not return for seven months. Your mother had for a nurse-maid an exceedingly pretty girl out of Danver. Her parents were superior people, but poor, and they had given their daughter some education, which helped to set her above her station, and give her silly ideas and a false position. As a

nurse, she did very nicely, and there being but one child and the baby, her place was an easy one. Her beauty was discussed amongst the mill-men, and I did not approve. I asked your mother to send her away, but she would not, alleging as her reason that the girl was well spoken, and remarkably steady in her conduct. This I knew to be correct; she turned her nose up at the men, and scoffed at the honest affection of poor Ben Barkley. In due course the baby commenced to cut his teeth, and a weary time we had of it. When you two have babies of your own, you will understand what that is.

"One night your mother was walking the room with him, and stopped at the window. The moon was at the full, and the garden as light as day. In three

minutes she was at the bedside: 'John! John! get up, Mr. Lovering is in the garden.'

"'Nonsense, Mary; what would he be doing there?'

"'How can I tell? Open the window and ask him; he is standing by the bay tree.'

"I got up—I opened the window; I could neither see nor hear anything. Naturally I laughed, and your mother was extremely indignant, and firmer than ever in her assertion that she had seen Will Lovering in the garden.

"The circumstance passed from my mind, and I am certain would never have returned to it, had not the nurse mysteriously disappeared three days after. She has not been heard of to this hour, to my knowledge, and your mother declared that Mr. Lovering had been the cause of her

going. The accusation was a serious one, and I bade her be silent on the subject. For my own part, I never believed he had anything to do with the girl leaving her home. She had wild romantic notions, and when girls get muddled with such like nonsense, they generally come to some harm.

"Now you know why your mother disliked Mr. Lovering, Mary."

"Was nothing ever heard of the girl, papa?"

"No. There was a hat found in the rushes at Rush-ferry, and it suggested the idea that she had made away with herself. But there was nothing to prove that the hat even was hers, much less that she was dead."

I had listened to every word with my eyes fixed upon the figure in the meadow.

The calves had come to him, and one little red one had snoozled its nose into his hand.

I withheld my opinion; a grave doubt, a terrible thought had suggested itself to my mind. My sense of honour was intensely shocked.

"Papa," deliberately spoke Mary, "the story you have just related is ugly if true, but to believe it upon such grounds would be ridiculous and unjust. I dismiss it from my mind."

"Perfectly right, Mary; never until you are obliged think ill of anyone. Be quite certain of one thing, whoever it was, their sin will find them out."

Their sin will find them out!

What a dreadful certainty, what a horrible prospect, the coming of justice; the administration of a punishment perhaps

deferred for years, and from which there is no escape.

"Do you happen to recollect the girl's name, Mr. Leete?"

"I do: Rose Russell."

Rose Russell! It echoed through the rick-yard, the sheep bleated it, the geese cackled it, and I remembered where I had seen that name. Scratched on the window in the Sun parlour, at the foot of Box Hill.

My husband's indisposition and ill-temper recurred to my memory with painful accuracy. I had been the means of recalling his sin to his mind—I, his wife, had spoken her name—called it pretty, laughed over it.

How he must have hated me at that moment!

CHAPTER VIII.

"When by night the frogs are croaking, kindle but a torch's fire,
Ha, how soon they all are silent! Thus truth silences the liar."

"Look, papa, at that man fondling those little cows!"

"Yes. He seems on good terms with them. Fondness for animals denotes a good kind heart. Choose your husband by that rule, Miss Sharland."

A wild uncontrollable laugh burst from me. It was the first sound I had made since Mr. Leete's mention of the name. I

laughed on, a gushing musical laugh that borrowed its melody from I knew not where, for my heart had no part in it.

It was like a mechanical cadence, and I was startled at what some organ within me was doing without my will. It ceased with a catching sob, suddenly as it commenced.

"Why do you laugh, Miss Sharland?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Leete, I had no wish to laugh just then. But the extraordinary contradiction of your example and precept provoked me. Some day that man yonder may be proved a villain, a—murderer. How about your maxim then?"

"Explain—I do not understand?"

"Yes, I will explain. That man is Mr. Lovering, the very person you have been speaking of, the man Mrs. Leete believed guilty of leading her nurse to destruction."

"Bless me, so it is! What excellent sight you have, Miss Sharland. Well, well, that animal recommendation hardly agrees with the tenor of our conversation, does it? He is coming this way."

Yes, he was coming. The man who held my heart for ever and aye.

What a strong well-knit figure!—what a noble carriage! How fair and true he seemed in thought and deed!

What a living lie!—what an abominable deception!—if Mrs. Leete's suspicion was correct.

"Let us go in, Mary," I said.

We went.

No sooner was I inside the house than I would have given anything to be out. The room reminded me of my fettered state—its four walls rendered me doubly conscious of my own cage. I shivered.

"Are you cold, Miss Sharland?" asked sharp Mary.

"Rather. I got a sudden chill by that rick; I was aware of it at the time."

Darkness gathered very slowly, as if regretful to shut out the sight of the harvest fields. I felt a wild despair in my heart as I looked at them, and not at Mary and Mr. Leete as they drove off. I turned my head and listened.

The old chestnut mare was going along musically; they would soon be home. God help me! what had come to me? I desired to contend with the illusion and defeat it. But my brain, once so sure, so active, refused to stir or hearken to other than the weird fancy.

Reader, I heard then, as distinctly as I see the words my pen traces upon this paper now, in the air, the trees, from every

blade of grass, every nodding ear of corn, every stem of barley, the word, "Good-bye."

Everything that had life came and whispered it to me. A thousand murmurs came from the corn-fields, where the poppies and great white daisies lay trampled by the reapers' feet into the dry earth.

The very birds had lost all timidity. They flew close, brushing my cheek as they darted into the boughs of the apple-trees.

I wrung my hands in silent anguish. I prayed to cry. Not a tear, not a sound came. Silence was upon me—that pent-up misery that shakes the brain and crushes the heart, till things real and actual cease to have any meaning.

Peggy fastening the doors roused me, and I went in. My throat was dry and

burning. A dish of plums stood on the table. I ate of them greedily.

While doing so I recollected the story of Mr. Lovering's meanness to the poor widow. He had carefully hidden that failing from me, as he had done other repulsive incidents in his life.

I would not think of the story Mr. Leete had told—I dare not trust myself to think of him, my husband, if he had so sinned.

I rose with the gleaners, and soon after he came, shouting and ordering the gaping fellows till everyone was in motion, and the sun pouring down on their exposed faces. I was numb and weak all day, and in the afternoon he deserted the field.

John was left to drive and struggle with the half-drunken mutinous band — the master had gone to Danver.

Once more in the sunshine and heat I had visitors. The ladies Lovering.

Peggy ushered them in with a great air, and I sickened directly I caught sight of the panting fat horses.

Poor old women! You are cold and silent enough now, and I will say nothing unkind. You only did what many constantly do: busied yourselves about others' affairs, and left your own unattended to.

Your ignorance made you cruel, not your hearts, and I forgive you.

CHAPTER IX.

"Not yet, not yet
Is the red sun wholly set,
But evermore recedes,
While open still I bear
The Book of Evil Deeds."

"ARE you quite well, Miss Sharland?" inquired Miss Naomi, when she and her sister were seated.

"Yes, I thank you. Do I look pale? The heat does not suit me exactly."

"Indeed. Many people complain of it. Very often a troubled mind renders the cheek pallid."

I had much difficulty in keeping the colour out of mine at that instant. The two ladies talked of the parish, the weather, themselves, myself, and still they did not go.

Assuredly the pith of the matter had not yet been reached. Hoarse cries came in from the fields, and Miss Miriam made an observation.

"The harvesters appear a rougher class than usual, this season?"

"I notice no difference. They are always rebellious when Mr. Lovering is absent."

A dead silence. I had struck a chord that jarred.

How I wished they might go!

"Miss Sharland, may I ask you to say whether you are assured of my sister's and my own good feelings towards you? Do

you consider that we are your well-wishers?"

My astonishment was immense.

"I have always supposed so, Miss Naomi," I replied, when I could speak, "and I should be sorry to change my opinion now."

"Do not do it, my dear child; pray, pray always retain that idea. It is true, we are indeed your friends. We are here to prove it to-day."

Tears ran down the wrinkled cheeks, washing off some of the rouge, and the thin neck was twitched by a spasm beneath the folds of delicate net. I waited. The old ladies looked appealingly at each other, and the lot fell to Miss Naomi.

"Miss Sharland," her voice was quivering in a suppressed whisper, "if we are wrong in our surmise, you must excuse

us, out of consideration for our motive—regard for you. If we are correct, we feel sure your own high principle will suggest thankfulness for our timely warning. We have thought for some time that our brother was very much and unusually interested in you. Of late, from his manner and words, we believe it is more than interest, in short—love. He is much your senior, and perhaps not to everyone very pleasant looking; but that he is fascinating, wickedly so, there is no doubt. And, Miss Sharland, he is cunning and determined. We have never seen him so charmed as when with you, and love to a man at his time of life, is a serious matter. You have made him your slave if you will, and very probably the conquest is all you care about. We hope so. To you personally we have no objection, Miss Sharland, but

there is a reason why you should be on your guard, not alone to prevent your name being coupled with his, but, if necessary, your heart. William is—MARRIED."

They were both watching me vigilantly out of their small faded eyes. I never moved. What my love was they were not likely to guess.

When their blood was as quick as mine, in their youth, they had never felt one rapid generous love-beat such as a great heart knows.

Poor creatures, why should I be angry? They meant well. But show them my torn bleeding heart, let them look and gape at the ruin of my life, the demolition of all my plans and hopes! *No;* so help me God, *never.*

Locked in my own breast, the agony

might and did rage; it should kill me ere I let it out.

So I spoke, a word, one: "Indeed."

And they, blind blunderers, sitting primly in false fronts and painted cheeks, did not know that I was like some poor bird shot dead in the midst of its carol, that the song was choked in my throat for all time, my rejoicing in this life at an end.

That was how it came—how God chose to deal with me, how I gleaned my harvest.

"Yes," said Miss Naomi, proceeding with her narrative; "he foolishly contracted a marriage in his youth with a girl of inferior rank. It was an immense sorrow and disappointment to us, and it has been a serious drawback to himself. Be good enough not to mention it, Miss Sharland. It is not known; we took every

precaution to prevent the disgrace becoming public. As it happens, we might have spared ourselves the shame of relating the circumstance to you. But we thought it would be such a dreadful thing if he won your affection."

"Dreadful, undoubtedly. I need not say I am obliged by the trouble you have taken to preserve my affections. What an anxious life you must lead, Miss Naomi, for fear he possesses himself of the hearts of your friends! Would it not be the easier plan to proclaim his marriage?"

"It is not worth while. You are the only one he has shown any preference for in the last seventeen years. We may safely postpone the disagreeable announcement another seventeen."

"Really! I may deem myself one of

the chosen, indeed, to have been selected for such an infamous preference, such a degrading honour."

"Miss Sharland, you are speaking of our brother."

"True, madam, I am. I wish I were not, for then he might not have been known to me, and I should have been spared the disgrace of being loved by a married man. Make yourselves content, now that I know your brother's true character, and the falsely balanced scales in which he weighs his honour, nothing would induce me to remember him with any other feeling than aversion."

They went out into the sunshine, vexed, indignant, but supported by the assurance of having done their duty.

CHAPTER X.

"Wake! wake!
All ye that sleep!
Pray for the dead!
Pray for the dead!
Why for the dead, who are at rest?
Pray for the living, in whose breast
The struggle between right and wrong
Is raging terrible and strong."

I WAS left with nothing but the misery that had come upon me to contemplate, nothing but my own damned condition and future to taunt and terrify me, and by these very terrors keep madness from seizing upon me.

If I had not been angry at the cheat played upon me, I verily believe I should have been an idiot before the sun set. What was I?

What a thing had he made me in the sight of God and man!

Accursed, branded, henceforth only to be looked at scornfully; never more to hold up my head fearlessly in the daylight, and claim equal respect with my sisterhood.

Did I desire to die? No. I desired to live. I would try to live, but not at Up Holland. I must go, anywhere, it mattered nothing; my secret would be company enough for me for many a day.

This then was what the universal "good-bye" of the previous evening meant.

The elements of mercy were struggling to find voice, lest I should pass from my home without any farewell.

As the necessity for going gained hold on my understanding, my agony increased. To leave my home, the place of rest and shelter secured to me by my own labour—to be again homeless, houseless, amongst strangers—to seek again for pupils, to trudge along streets thronged with unfamiliar faces—to know that no one sought or cared for me, no help forthcoming in my hour of need.

Fierce rebellion seized upon me. Why should I do this thing? why make myself an outcast?

Because, replied cruel conscience, were your secret known, you would be spurned. Think what you are! No better than—than——

Ah! I could not say that word, not even in a whisper to myself.

To the ground my aching head was

bowed, and my sobs racked my body, until from sheer inability to cry any more I became quiet. Those tears did me good. I was cooler, mentally stronger, though my legs tottered under me.

It was almost dark when I heard the gate in the orchard click, and for the first time my pulse did not quicken. I waited, but not with smiling lips and glad eyes as of yore. I wished he would stay away. My love was dead.

He came into the room, up to where I sat, and I gave him no greeting. I looked at him, laid up a store for the time when I should famish for a sight of the face that had worked my destruction. I knew it was for the last time for many a day, and so intent was I upon satisfying my own greed, that I did not notice the expression in his eyes.

He had come very close.

"Grace! Grace! are you ill?"

"Oh, no, no!" I answered, waving him off. "I am perfectly well. Oblige me by coming no nearer, Mr. Lovering."

"Grace! why, what?"

"Why! what indeed! You know what. Look into my face, and learn there is but one thing that could call forth the expression you see in it—your treachery."

"Treachery!"

"Aye, treachery, deceit, cheating, lying, wickedness, anything you prefer to term it. I know all, now it is too late to profit by the knowledge. I know that you have wronged me cruelly, cheated me deliberately, damned me without any remorse. Taken advantage of the great love that disarmed suspicion, that blinded my eyes to your hypocrisy. Your sisters have

been here to warn me against encouraging you, as you were—married. Is it not comical, telling a wife to beware of her husband? Now I understand why I was to keep my marriage a secret. It was not to smoothe matters for myself, it was simply to enable you to carry out your dishonourable intentions—give you time to nurse your fiendish plans. I have been a cat's-paw, you have made me a scapegoat, and I must suffer as only a betrayed woman can suffer. But wait a little—I am no visionary, no spiritualist, yet I see. See that between you and all happiness, peace, rest, in life and in death, I and my wrong shall stand. I curse you, as your sin has cursed me. There is a God, a Judge, an omnipotent arbitrator who grants awards. He will give me mine, He *will not* suffer my head to go dishonoured to the grave."

I was inspired with courage, hope, as I thought of everyone's Friend, impartial alike to saint or sinner.

I gained new strength as I spoke, and I saw the man for whom I had forgotten my God tremble before me.

His evident anguish I rather enjoyed : it was but just he should suffer something when I suffered so much. Bad he was, that I had proved, but he loved me. Very likely he had no other genuine feeling, such men only make slaves of themselves once. His agony, as I read it on his ghastly countenance, was by no means of a mild order. His punishment would be severe.

It is said a woman's heart is tender, her resolution shaken easily.

That is a mistake ; the woman capable of deep love is equally capable of intense

hate. I would not have shortened one pang, if I could.

My determination gained force as I looked at him. Probably my courage gleamed in my eyes; for once I felt he was not my master. My intellect subdued him—he was not even my equal.

He knew, and saw this. No attempt did he make to revive my love; he knew me well enough to feel that he had lost all power over me.

"Did you tell them their good intentions were too late?"

"No. I still retain for myself the respect you have abused."

"Then you are not going to expose my sin, make a fuss?"

"Oh dear no! I should gain nothing by publicity. I have not even a relation who would horsewhip you. Law would

give me nothing, only authorise the world to put a cross upon me. I know my position: there is no justice, no redress, for such as I. The trap you set was cleverly contrived, Mr. Lovering; I have no one to blame but myself for being caught. You and I can have but two feelings in common, henceforth—silence and hate. I swear I will never divulge your infamy, for by so doing I should expose my own blasted fame. You are safe, quite safe."

"Safe! I distrust your calmness, your self-imposed secrecy. Your sarcasm is more cutting than words. What are you going to do, Grace?"

"Nothing."

"Yes you are. Some plan is decided upon—I have a right to know."

"I dispute that right. We are strangers."

"Strangers! Pooh, pooh! we can never be that."

"We can, we *shall*."

"Now you talk nonsense. When we meet we must for decency's sake speak."

"We shall not meet."

He started. My intentions crossed his mind; but he refused to understand, and decked his white lips with a smile.

"Perhaps you are thinking of going away?"

"I am."

"For three weeks?"

"Quite three weeks."

"Might you extend those weeks into months?"

"I might."

My tone betrayed me. His hands caught mine, his livid, horrified face was bent over me.

I was but a little thing beside him, and for a second my courage failed. He was mad, as men sometimes are. I was his dearest (then, at all events), and he had never been thwarted.

To those who know what such strong passionate men are, it will not seem unlikely that for a passing moment my life was in peril. Under other circumstances I might have been afraid; as it was, I valued my existence so little that I made no sign beyond a smile.

My body was in his power, but my soul released would go to its Giver. I defied him. He flung my hands away and shuddered.

"You need not speak; I have read your thoughts. It is your heart I covet, your love freely given, and that you deny me. Are you going to leave me, Grace?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"For ever."

He made no sound, but I heard his gasping breath.

"You will change your mind, Grace?"

"No."

"Will you *try* to change it?"

"Not upon any account."

"Then you are *glad* to go?"

"I am."

"You prefer being alone, unloved, uncared for, amongst strangers, to remaining with me, and finding peace and safety in my love?"

"I prefer all that, hard work and poverty as well, rather than live an unlawful life. What is it you would make me?—your mistress! You woed and won me for your wife; I cannot forget that."

"You *are* my wife, and but for those

prating women would have been happy enough as such. She, that other, was no wife to me. My crime was no greater than any other man's; but I was young, sympathetic in those days, and made her a reparation she neither valued nor expected. I was a virtuous young fool—I gave my name, my liberty, in lieu of a twenty-pound note. So much for honour. I am now rewarded for having had too much of that commodity by losing what I love better than my life—*you;* by being left to drag through my remaining days void of love and companionship, coupled to the tormenting reflection that the woman I worship believes me a brute, a villain, and *hates* me. A man has gone mad with not half so good a reason, or blown his brains out. But my Grace, my wife, has mercy?—she will stay?"

He kissed my lips, my brow, my eyes. My silence deceived him; he thought his pleading had been successful.

I disengaged myself promptly.

"She will not stay. The mind and life you allude to are not hers to take care of. Mr. Lovering, understand me—I am going."

He looked stunned; for a second his pride and rage checked his speech; then he said:

"Grace, stay! I will do *anything* if you will only stay with me!"

His arms were outstretched, his face—I see it in my dreams—so full of longing, so earnest in its pleading!

Prudence warned me to go. I went. When we meet, I know that look will be in his face; and I, what shall I be to him in heaven?

He had gone. Everything was still.

CHAPTER XI.

"Rough wind, that moanest loud
Grief too sad for song;
Wild wind, when sullen cloud
Knells all the night long;
Sad storm, whose tears are vain;
Bare woods, whose branches stain:
Deep caves and dreary main,
Wail, for the world's wrong!"

I KNEW Peggy would be alone in the kitchen. I found her putting patches on one of John's jackets with the door into the yard wide open. I shut it.

"Are we alone, Peggy?"

"Yes, Miss Grace. The Lord is

the only one who will hear what we say."

She bent nearer the candle, and burnt the end of the cotton in the flame to facilitate the process of threading.

It was a good old face, wrinkled and browned, like a russet apple, the grey hair drawn back under the big white cap; but there was abundance of life in it yet. Peggy was a wiry, hale woman, who would keep going to the last.

I stood looking at her—at the clean roomy kitchen, with its old clock and rows of bright tins—the wide windows, with their blue-and-white-checked curtains looped back, and the moonlight streaming in on the scrubbed boards.

When should I see it again, when should I have another home? I was not fit to make one at any fireside; not equal

to the untaught, honest serving-woman, patching her good man's sleeves. What had my talent done for me?

Made me conspicuous, perhaps rather peculiar and attractive, and enticed someone to covet what they had no right to possess. It mattered nothing now where I was going; my voice and music might help me to win some sort of a living, but all ambition, all pride in myself, was gone.

I sat down at the other side of the table, the tallow candle between us. It reminded me of the days when I lived with my father in Holland village, and sometimes had a talk with Peggy and John in the kitchen, and wrote their letters for them, or tried to teach John to read, and slapped his horny hand. How kind these simple folks had been to me; how true! If they

only knew what I was, how it would hurt and embitter their hearts.

They *must not* know.

"Peggy, I am going away. If I like the place I shall very probably take up my abode there. Danver, you know, Peggy, is not a large place, and I want to gain a better connection and more money. I shall not be young always, and it is necessary that I should at least try to make some provision for old age."

The woman looked at me in a startled, distressed manner.

"Never, surely, Miss Grace! We thought maybe you would stay for always by us. We shall be but too poor simpletons without you. Well, well!"

"You must not take it to heart, Peggy; if I am ill, or in trouble, I will send to you. Things can go on as usual. Mr. Lovering

is not flitting, and John is his right-hand man. I may come back any day."

"To be sure; and your bed shall always be aired, and the sitting-room in order. When are you going, Miss Grace?"

"It is advisable that I should go at once, and I have a plan in my mind. John is so busy with the harvest that he cannot be spared to drive me to the station during the day, in the yellow cart, and I hardly fancy Joe doing it. So it would be better for me to go early in the morning, before they commence working. Don't interrupt me, Peggy—I am decided upon going. There is an express that stops at Danver, at half-past five; we can catch that. I will go and prepare, and you waken John in good time."

I hurried away. I allowed her no time to speak. Poor soul! the big tears rolling

down the livid cheeks, the trembling hand lifted in horror, affected me deeply. A scene I must avoid; my strength had been sorely taxed, and I needed all to carry me through. Neither of us went to bed that night. There was much to be done.

At a quarter to five Peggy gave me some breakfast.

"Miss Grace, forgive me; but are—are you going to be married?"

Had she asked me that question a week before I should have blushed. Now the horror of my situation threw genuine indignation and earnestness into voice and expression as I made the denial.

"No, Peggy; I am not. I shall *never* marry. By the way, when you see Mr. Lovering, give him that."

I placed in her hand a sealed package,

containing the money he had given me when I believed myself entitled to it.

The drive to the station was silent. Not because my companion was a servant. I inherited from my mother the knack of making myself pleasant to people of any rank, without tempting them to forget their station. But my heart was heavy. John cried openly like any child, and the sleepy porters stared at our parting.

I had the carriage to myself, and plenty of time to collect my ideas and form my plans. My money was but little; employment I must procure directly, or speedily become a prey to poverty in a strange city.

London was reached before twelve, and I went to a near hotel, where I had some refreshment, and left my luggage. Then I sought lodgings, and found them in a

quiet little street behind a square. They were clean rooms, poorly furnished, but I liked the woman—a fat, motherly creature. She had been for many years cook in Lord Harrington's family, her husband butler.

He went out as waiter. There were no children; the house was very tiny, but perfectly clean. The woman was hard-working and neat; the man polite and sober-looking. I thought Mr. and Mrs. Stubbs a very nice couple; and when they reappeared from the kitchen, and said they would take me, I was well pleased.

To get my luggage was the next duty, and having seen that safely stowed in the bedroom, I told Mrs. Stubbs I should not return before tea-time.

By then she smilingly told me the cupboard and drawers upstairs would be emptied and the bed made up.

My next quest was to find some means of earning money. I did not care to teach if I could help it. My desire was to procure engagements to play at parties, either piano or violin.

CHAPTER XII.

"Ah me! I think I am lonelier here;
It is hard to go, but harder to stay!"

Into Regent Street I hastened, and entered a noted music-shop. My request I made in the clearest manner, and was in no wise disconcerted by the stare the fashionable young shopman bestowed upon me.

I was in earnest, reader, *real* earnest, and despair gives courage. If I allowed myself to sink with timidity; I should soon be penniless, and what then?

While Mr. Curls and Waxed Moustache was conferring with another man behind a glass case, I caught sight of my own reflection in a mirror.

Regent Street did not often see such an object. My dress lacked what is termed style, and hung round my tired limbs in beautiless folds.

My face, what with trouble and the long journey, had a fixed eagerness gleaming out of its deadly whiteness that startled even me.

My first questioner returned accompanied by another older and better mannered.

"You require engagements to play at parties, madam?"

"Yes, or pupils."

"What do you play?"

"Piano and violin. I also sing."

He smiled.

"We do recommend teachers, but they are obliged to be first-rate musicians; and for parties they must also be good even players and accustomed to the fatigue."

"Yes, I know. I have taught before, but not in London. Since I bring no references there is nothing for it but for you to test my capabilities. I don't expect you to recommend me upon no better authority than my own word."

I advanced to a piano and opened it. I played a variety of music, and then I sang. The men stood in silence, and I saw surprise on their faces.

"Can you lend me a violin?"

They brought me one. As I drew the bow across its strings I thought of my deserted home, wherein I had raised sounds born of love, and which would know them no more.

I forgot the shop, the men, my loneliness; I played to an invisible being—I let my misery, my passionate love have its way.

When I stopped my listeners were loud in their praise. Two more had been added to the number.

Oh, yes; they would recommend me, in fact, give me an engagement to play with Madam Marnet the following evening at Mrs. Shultz's, in Gordon Square.

I had better call upon madame, to whom they gave me a letter of introduction.

My name and address was entered in their books. "Mrs. Sharland."

I was bowed out most politely, and in a state of great rejoicing I went to several other music-sellers, and acted similarly. It was hot and dusty; I felt suffocated, and longed for the country.

Upon inquiring where Marion Place was, I discovered that it was a long way off, so went in an omnibus.

I arrived at the house. A plate on the door announced that Monsieur Marnet taught French, German and Italian, and prepared pupils for examinations. It made no mention of Madame Marnet.

I had never been inside a professional house before. I gasped for breath. The closeness of the dismal dirty house nearly suffocated me.

The room into which I was shown was neat; but no calculation of mine could decide when it had last been cleaned.

From some other apartment came the shrill screaming voice of monsieur giving a lesson. A vibration in the room caused me to turn.

Madame had entered

It is ungenerous to ridicule a friend, a worthy person, least of all a woman. I will content myself by saying that Madame Marnet was the most inordinately stout person I had ever seen.

The impression she made upon me was peculiar. I was for a few seconds reduced to a state of suppressed nervousness that gave me positive suffering. The cause thereof was this.

Her fat was under no restraint: it hung in flaps, lumps in every visible place, and gave to her appearance a heaving, swelling motion, that to my unaccustomed eye threatened damage, if not destruction, as she neared the various articles of furniture. She balanced herself against the table to read the note I handed her.

Presently she turned and held out a beautifully formed hand.

"I am happy to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Sharland. You are mentioned in very complimentary terms, and anyone embracing my art is to me as a sister."

I made an appropriate reply, and begged to see the list of music selected for that evening. It was nearly all known to me, the only stranger a waltz.

"Are you a widow, Mrs. Sharland?"

"Yes, a recent one. I have never been out before perhaps you will tell me what we are expected to do, Madame Marnet?"

"With pleasure, my dear. I have been running about into first one grand house, and then another, for some thirty-five years, and know them all well. We are engaged to amuse the company—we are of no consequence. They give us supper, and perhaps a glass of wine during the evening. When any lady or gentleman wishes to

display their musical proficiency, we are permitted to listen, and at such times I often wish I were deaf. My niece used to accompany me, but she has married, and I am really glad to meet with you, dear. You are not unlike Katie. The house we are going to to-morrow evening is a German one, and the class of people more intelligent. I will call for you at nine o'clock, and be sure you put a spare string in your violin-case by way of precaution."

The good lady would have talked on; but I was tired and faint, so I bade her adieu till the time appointed.

Very well pleased with my afternoon's work, I reached Moss Street, and Mrs. Stubbs gave me some tea.

Afterwards I unpacked, and tried on the white lace cap I had bought on my way home. Widows should wear caps. I

looked well in them, and when dressed I was reminded of that night at the Manor when I acted the widow.

It seemed years since I left Up Holland. My life was changed, and I wanted to forget. Ah! what queer forgetfulness; how I suffered that night in the small bare bed-room!

The squeals of the cats gathered on the tiles of the neighbouring houses nearly distracted me.

Was it a dream? Was it true that I was disgraced, and alone in the hard world? My wedding ring clashed against the wall as I threw my hand out of bed in agony. Yes, it was true. That thread of gold was my only link with the past. I should never again waken to see the brown lined face sleeping on the pillow beside me—never again.

What I suffered! I watched the cold dawn creeping round, I stifled the moans that rose to my parched lips, and strove to be strong. On I must go, finding no resting-place for the soles of my feet, seeking no love, making no friends.

I was no wife. Cunning said, "Pretend you are; false widowhood is your only chance." I took it, and the lie once in my mouth, grew there. Mrs. Stubbs was sympathetic and curious.

My tale was simple. My husband had died abroad soon after our marriage, and I was left unprovided for.

The hard misery that had stolen into my face made far more impression than my words. To have doubted that I was in sorrow would have been impossible; I looked the widow to perfection.

Sorrow there is of many kinds, but no

sorrow like unto mine; no trouble so heavy as one that cannot be told. It was like a strong hand: it held me, crushed me, wrung all the feeling out of my heart, and I became something less than human. I was afraid of myself. May you never know that feeling, reader!

Do not imagine it foretells insanity—mine did not. It means this—what we should all be deprived of, hope and love. Very few know what that is, how it makes you feel. I do. As I toiled and worked, I was no woman. I had no sympathy or feeling for any other being, or for myself.

When I saw a funeral, I felt inclined to laugh. A child shivering in rags at a street corner roused wonderment in my breast, not pity. All the dangers that assail life glanced off me. The world to

me was an amusing, wicked, wonderful place, since I had nothing in it but a box of clothes and a violin.

My body I set no price upon: it had no heart in it. I had but one interest—my profession.

Fortunately, the Stubbses did not object to music, and I could practise as much as I liked.

CHAPTER XIII.

"Gallant, graceful, gentle, tall,
Fairest, noblest, best of all."

True to her promise, Madame Marnet came, and we together repaired to the mansion in Gordon Square.

Madame Marnet was known to the Stubbses, Stubbs frequently waiting at houses where she played.

We were received by two footmen, who were to my mind very polite, considering our errand. One at length said something to Madame Marnet, who replied in a good-natured manner.

"Oh, dear no! We are Mrs. Sharland and Madame Marnet, the musicians."

Then to me, with a smothered laugh:

"It must be your appearance. They took us for guests; we have had a narrow escape of cutting a ridiculous figure."

After this, I held my violin in a conspicuous position. We were early; few people had arrived. Our place was by the piano.

Miss Shultz came up first and greeted Madame Marnet with the easy good-manners few English can command when addressing those they consider their inferiors. She was a pretty, plump, fair girl, and her fond papa called her his "Lily."

Madame Marnet introduced me, and mentioned that I played the violin. Some years ago it was not very generally known amongst ladies.

Mrs. Shultz came up.

A strange excitement took possession of me—the feeling I had experienced when a child, when I used to go to brilliant balls, in imagination, or see new lands and sun-lit seas, while I listened to my father's music.

My fingers wandered to my violin, as the means of giving vent to my feelings, and Madame Marnet requested me to play. The company were quickly arriving. Her object was a good one; she wished me to be heard by Mr. Shultz and some other judges of music, who were conversing in the next room. I played, and played the room full. They came flocking in, in haste and eagerness. I stopped. My hand was shaken warmly. These Germans were genuinely pleased, and granted me praise readily. Who had I learnt from? They

mentioned several celebrated names that I had never even heard of.

I could only reply that my father had taught me. Fearing further inquiry, I freed myself from their well-meant curiosity by a coldness of manner and evident dislike to interrogation that proved more than effectual.

They left us. Madame Marnet now commenced:

"Why do you give them the cold shoulder? They would like to befriend you. In this house ability ranks higher than money or birth. You should not throw friends away, my dear."

"I know it; but I prefer not speaking of myself. I will play and sing for their money's worth, and more; but they must leave my personal affairs alone. I decline to be communicative to *anyone*."

"I understand, Mrs. Sharland. Your face is full of a story that would tickle the ears of the world, and make you famous, or I am mistaken. But you will never tell it. Very likely your determination is a wise one, and Louisa Marnet will never try to shake it."

I made no reply. I must be credited with *some* sort of history.

Young women are not suddenly driven to seeking their living without first having stepped on a thorn. A false statement would make no impression upon me; but the *truth*—the bitter deception that had been practised upon me—if *that* got banded abroad, I should die of shame and rage.

I held my tongue. I neither contradicted nor affirmed, and I trusted to Providence in guiding the world to make a history for me out of the decentest

materials ever used in that charitable occupation. I only dreaded the truth.

Towards the middle of the evening I got a genuine fright. I thought I saw the lovely "Clem" waltzing on the arm of a fat officer, and for a second my fingers trembled. In a couple of moments the danger was dispelled by a nearer view, whereupon I discovered that it was only another tall young person, with painted eyes and dyed hair. I judged it to be an enjoyable party: animated faces and sparkling eyes constantly met mine. Had I dared I would have uttered a warning; told the silly girls that not one man in twenty meant what he said. It amused them to see the timid, hopeful look that proclaimed their success, that was all—they cared nothing. The sooner a girl is made acquainted with this fact the better.

Experience is certain to teach it ere long. Be cautious; distrust what a man says. The more tenderly it is worded, the more pathetically uttered, only renders it all the more certain it has been rehearsed many a time before.

It was getting light when Madame Marnet and I stepped into the square. The fresh morning air smelt wondrously sweet. We were both very tired. I thought how the sun would be rising over the cornfields at home, the cocks crowing, the sheep bleating.

I was alone, indeed, in that vast city, with only a few sparrows twittering on a house-top. I scarcely needed madame's expression of satisfaction at my performance, and hope that I would continue to accompany her.

"I am growing old, Mrs. Sharland, and

my connection is good. Nothing would please me better than to leave it in your hands."

I started.

"Impossible, Madame Marnet; I have no money to buy anyone's connection. I must make as I go on."

"You misunderstand me. Money is not needed. It is merely an introduction to my friends and patrons, and your name placed after mine in Messrs. Quavers' books. If you accompany me, gradually you can slide into my place."

I thanked her warmly, and agreed.

A cab coming past at that moment stopped our conversation. Madame got into it. I declined, Moss Street being so near.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there weep our sad bosoms empty."

The Stubbses were asleep—worthy couple, when I entered. I had a latch-key. I went to bed, and slept until ten o'clock. Then I awoke to find Mrs. Stubbs at my bedside with the breakfast-tray. I appreciated her goodness, though I was incapable of showing it. My gratitude, like my affection, was dead.

During the day, having no settled employment, I took to considering how I

could make more money. My engagements would not be for every night. What should I do with my leisure ones? Teach? No; my patience was worn out. I had done that in happier days, when I knew someone watched for me, and was proud of my success. Now, no one took heed whether I feasted or fasted. I would do something that by reason of its strangeness could invoke no past recollections.

My heart was too sore to stand much. In spite of all my efforts, there were times when I cried deep in my heart bitter tears for my husband; when I would have given all I possessed to creep into his arms once more.

Thank God, those periods of weakness were not frequent, and after them I despised myself. I ought to be thankful for

my escape from a sinful course. I was thankful.

I sat all day long in the tiny parlour, listening to the street sounds. I might have gone to one of the parks, and filled my lungs with pure air. I might have walked in the fashionable thoroughfares. I did neither. I sat on, thinking of some new road to money and release from my own thoughts.

As I sat a voice reached me through the open window, a woman's voice, shrill, discordant, singing a popular ditty in the square.

An idea shot through my brain, my cheek coloured. Why should not I sing and play the violin?

There was nothing to prevent me but my pride. And what right had such as *I* with pride?

Very likely the woman singing there, whose voice was unpleasant to my educated ear, had a husband she could call her own. I would try it.

Putting on my bonnet, I walked out and sought until I found a hairdresser's of moderate pretensions. Inside I went, and asked the price of a piece of matted light hair in the window. The man replied "fifteen shillings." I offered him ten, and he took it.

My next search was for an optician's. There I bought a pair of blue spectacles. Content with my disguise, I returned, resolved to try the effect of it that evening.

At first I was undecided whether I should tell Mrs. Stubbs of my queer determination or try to keep it secret. Second thoughts urged me to tell, for if by chance they saw me coming in or going out, they

would naturally be both surprised and distrustful in future.

I told. Mrs. Stubbs burst into a hearty laugh.

"You going to turn street singer, Mrs. Sharland?"

"I think so. I shall disguise myself completely; and on a fine night, if not engaged, shall play and sing for an hour or two in the squares. I need more money, Mrs. Stubbs, and that is a perfectly honest way of obtaining it, if rather peculiar."

"Just so. I should not wonder if you make good money by it neither—you have a wonderful voice. Stubbs was telling me how you was praised."

Praise of myself was a distasteful theme. To please those we love one may do anything, but to take an interest in one's own

success is impossible, unless by such means the necessaries of life are procured. That very night I began my new profession.

When I had got the disguise on I did not know myself. Stubbs offered to go with me, in case I should be frightened or annoyed. I declined, deeming it best to accustom myself to no assistance that might at any time be withdrawn. I was distrustful of anything now. Once I had been too confiding, too unsuspicious.

I had innocently let my joy be seen, my love for one man I foolishly thought no sin. I estimated him by myself. And how had I been rewarded for so believing and loving?

I had been deliberately deceived, and ruthlessly set outside the pale of honesty. Not any human being fate might cast in

my path that night could be more degraded than I.

I looked in the glass. My teeth gleamed between my lips, my eyes glittered as if with wine. I felt the mad uncontrollable laughter surging to my lips; that utter recklessness of self was upon me.

Was I going mad? Had the duty I had imposed upon myself been too severe? Judge of my misery when I say that madness had even no terror for me, rather a charm.

Once mad, recollections could not sting me, memory no longer make a slave of me. No; insanity was too respectable for such as I—it was only Satan standing behind me and whispering:

"Go back, go to him. He is wandering in the meadows now, his eyes

are dim with unshed tears, his courage, his spirit is broken. Think how he would welcome you, how you could nestle in his strong arms, and cease trembling for ever."

A moment given to such tempting, a moment in which all that was womanly in me was torn and harrowed, and then my love burst its fetters, and cried aloud with too great bitterness to form words.

It was a moan that, wrung out of my broken heart, astonished my yet sound mind. I jumped up. I had sunk huddled in my wretchedness by some article of furniture. I was ashamed of my weakness; mentally I apologised to my pride.

At the foot of the stairs I encountered Mrs. Stubbs, her usually ruddy complexion a dull grey.

"Mrs. Sharland, did you hear that cry?"

"I do not recollect any strange sound, Mrs. Stubbs. You must have heard some street cry."

"I did nothing of the kind. No cry ever made in a street can curdle my blood as that did. I dare not be alone; I'll knock on the wall for Mrs. O'Neil to come in."

I left her hammering on the wall with a candlestick, and went out. I profited by the lesson.

If I permitted my feelings to break lose, my secret would soon be discovered. I uttered no second cry.

CHAPTER XV.

"What right have you, O passer by the way, to call any flower a weed? Do you know its merits? its virtues? its healing qualities? Because a thing is common, shall you despise it? If so, you might despise the sunshine for the same reason."

I HURRIED on till I came to a square, then I stopped and sang an Irish song. A crowd gathered. Windows were opened, and what I supposed to be bits of paper flew out.

"You're new at your trade, you are. Why don't you pick up your money?"

This remark attracted my notice, and I

gathered all I could now see—one. The crowd had kindly saved me the exertion of stooping. This screw of paper contained sixpence. I moved on, playing my violin, and singing alternately.

At ten I went home. I counted my earnings. Nine shillings and fourpence. I was satisfied. I determined to employ my spare time in this manner.

Very soon I got used to it, and was not a little gratified to find I was welcome. I made circuits, and sang in all the principal localities.

In the rich neighbourhoods my takings were large. I picked my time, when dinner was over, and drew the fashionable ladies and gentlemen to the balconies and windows, the servants to the door and area railings.

I had some adventures and annoyances

—a proposal from a noted music-hall proprietor, that I should sing there twice a week. The sum he offered was large.

But no amount of money could have induced me to forget what was due to myself and my relations. This is difficult to explain ; and those who have no nobility will probably sneer at the notion.

It was a feeling that had grown with me, and influenced my life. It had more power over me than religion or scruples of sex. It had never found utterance ; no boast had I ever made of my connections. And yet the knowledge that I was well born stood like a guard between me and all commonalty.

I saw no disgrace in standing and singing. I spoke to no one, I asked no charity, I did not even thank for what I got. I did not know the givers, they

did not know the receiver. I was spared the humiliation of being under an obligation.

I drew my shawl closer and walked on. The evenings were growing cold. Soon I left my admirers behind, and stopped to consider where I was. I did not know the street; it was quiet, the houses spacious. One had the door open, and displayed many lights. I advanced, and read on the lamp—club.

I turned to go, and narrowly escaped being knocked down by a cab that dashed up. It contained two gentlemen, Mr. Hastings, and—my husband. I had presence of mind to turn my head away; as it was, he touched me as he jumped out.

Standing there stunned, I heard again the tones of a man who had proposed to me, rather differently tuned, as he paid

cabby. Poor Mr. Hastings! had he known, he might not have haggled over sixpence.

Another second, and they were gone.

Now there came upon me the unreasonableness of a woman. I wanted to see the man I had striven with might and main to avoid.

My feet refused to move; I became stationary on the pavement, and watched as in a dream waiters passing along the hall. I would have given three years of my life to have changed places with one of those men, and entered the room where he was. It was on the left hand side of the door, and he sat with his back to the window. I watched every turn of the head, with its tossed curls, every impetuous twist of the broad shoulders.

I remembered how, sitting opposite to

him many an evening, I had seen the wit and laughter in his expressive face, and hidden the love I feared was in mine. Now I was outside, and could not see his face or guess his humour.

But I would, I *would.* A moment to recover my composure, and I commenced to sing a song then raging in London. I dared not venture upon one I had ever sung at Up Holland. I did not know how often he had stood in the garden, and I knew the good memory he possessed.

Here, as elsewhere, the gift bestowed upon me pleased and attracted. Money rattled on the stones, I picked none up.

I saw the startled eyes striving to fathom my disguise, the perplexed face.

Suddenly I missed him. He was coming out. He would set doubt at rest.

I fled up the quiet street, and crouched behind a pillar in a doorway. He came, quicker than I supposed he could. Baffled, angry, he stopped where I lay hidden.

"What a fool I am to be so deceived. Yet I could have sworn it was her. No other woman's voice ever moved me like that—I doubt if there is such another. But my Grace would not have run away from me! Ah, Grace! Grace!"

He retraced his steps slowly; and I—shall I confess it to you, reader, who probably are sitting so that you can see your husband's face behind his paper?—I laid my throbbing head down on the cold stone, and cried for joy that he had not forgotten me. I don't know how long I lay there; when I got up, weak and numb, and tottered down the street, the club door was shut.

I found a cab, and asked the man the name of the street. He told me. Into that street I must never go again; indeed, for the present not into any. I hid myself for the next few days, going out only in a cab.

I was ill, strangely nervous and weak. I consulted a doctor. He told me I had received a severe shock, but that nature had set about the cure herself. The worst was over. I bought a paper while walking till I met a cab.

It was the *Times* and I very improperly commenced reading it as I strolled on. I unconsciously lapsed into a habit acquired when at Up Holland.

Many a morning I had made myself acquainted with the news while I trudged onwards. I did not open it, I read as it was folded.

The first thing that caught my eye was an immense "Grace."

I knew I was the "Grace" therein named. Terror again seized me, and I might have been reduced to dire necessity, had not a ricketty fly come along. I hailed it. When shut up in it, I turned to the startling "Grace," and read :

"Grace is earnestly entreated to communicate with her husband, who believes he saw her in —— Street on Tuesday evening.—W. L."

Wrong or right, I made no attempt to communicate with him ; I shut myself up as if I were in fear of my life. And yet for my life I cared not a fig. But I did for my honour, and I own that with that harsh face before me, softened and beauti-

fied by the love I inspired, my sense of even that became confused.

When my self-imposed imprisonment was nearly intolerable, Madame Marnet appeared upon the scene.

I welcomed madame—her fine person quite filled my tiny parlour, and the cab-horse hung its head dejectedly, and panted for breath.

I waited for her to speak; I wondered what had brought her to me in such haste.

"Mrs. Sharland, have you ever heard of Lady Fane's charity?"

"Never."

"You astonish me. But in a few moments I can tell you all that is necessary to enable you to decide whether you will accept her offer. Lady Fane is a very charming and good woman. I have

taught her nieces, the Earl of Hamilton's daughters, all the music they know, and very proud of them I am. Lady Fane had only one child, a daughter, who died two years since. When it became a certainty that the poor girl could not live, having some complaint that gradually weakened both body and mind, her mother devoted a large sum of money in her child's name to a charity, and this is the charity: a home for ladies who, through age or delicacy are rendered unfit for labour. They are established in a neat row of cottages at Chislehurst, near Lady Fane's home. Now, Mrs. Sharland, I come to the point that connects us with this excellent charity—a triplet of concerts. Lady Fane proposes to give in the village schoolroom three good concerts, to attend which all the inhabitants are in-

vited at a very low rate of charge. The selected professionals are Madame Marnet, Mrs. Sharland, Mr. S——and Mr. R——. The terms are liberal, and we are Lady Fane's guests for the week. Will you accept?"

I reflected for a short time, long enough to decide that I had never heard Mr. Lovering name any friends at Chislehurst —indeed, anywhere out of his own county. Also, that I should be safer in Chislehurst than London for the present.

I accepted, and inquired when we were to go.

"Next week, and I must run to my dressmaker at once, for I cannot go to Lady Fane's shabby."

This opened to my mind a new line of reflection, and I resolved to make no difficulties; however, I was put about for

the toilette. Like most other things, the dress became a less serious matter the more I thought about it. I had the conviction that I should "do."

CHAPTER XVI.

"I greet you well, ye noble lords;
Fair dames, my homage fetting!"

We puffed out of Charing Cross station at a quarter to ten on the Monday morning. Madame Marnet had worked herself into a state of breathlessness that imposed silence upon her, and I was not sorry.

"I feel tired," murmured the good lady presently. "I have been busy arranging for Adolph's comfort. He will have a few friends while I am away."

I made no reply. I recollected hideous

little fat Adolph, and felt not the least doubt about him having friends of both sexes, and various grades, during his excellent wife's absence.

Sooner than I expected we reached Chislehurst. A carriage awaited us. The sight of it reminded me of the only carriage I had ever ridden in, and the owner of it.

The station was a long way from Chislehurst village. The common, with its surrounding old-fashioned houses and shops, stood high, and caught every breeze.

I inhaled the air gratefully ; the sight of the trees and woods moved me like a child : my eyes filled with tears. I was so glad to be in the country once more ; I knew now that the perpetual sight of bricks and mortar hurt me.

Madame Marnet noticed my tears.

"I understand," said she, patting my hand kindly; "when you were happy you lived in the country, Mrs. Sharland?"

"I did."

The carriage turned down a narrow green lane and stopped before a very old red-stone house.

It was mossy, green, and probably damp, but oh! so pretty.

"Courthey" had been in the Fane family generations, handed down without any dispute from father to son.

The present owner had possessed it from almost babyhood, living there with his mother and sisters all his life, and in turn bringing home a wife to it. Of this marriage there were two sons. Then came a death, and a time of sorrow, followed by rejoicing, for Lord Fane married again, a most attractive lady, con-

siderably younger than himself. No wife was more fondly or deservedly loved than Helen, Lady Fane.

Two years after this marriage a daughter was born—a poor suffering child, for whom nothing could be done. Gradually the disease gained ground, and grew as she grew, till at last, so long had she suffered, so patiently had they watched and hoped only to be deceived, that when death did come, he was welcome.

Lady Fane was a woman of sense and courage, but her anguish was none the less keen, and though only forty, her hair was snow white.

In the thickly-carpeted hall she stood, a large hound by her side, a most winning woman. A white lace cap was pinned on the well-shaped head, and rested on the blanched hair, as one only sees it

rarely. Not one woman in a hundred can wear a cap becomingly.

Eyes and eyebrows retained their youthful colour and brilliancy—a rich brown, full of devotion and gentleness.

Her face when in repose was sad, nay stern; when she smiled, the radiance overspread her entire countenance, and warmed you to your heart's core.

She greeted us now, uttering welcome and looking it. Her soft cool hand grasped mine, with the genuine feeling of a brave-hearted woman.

She was never ashamed of anything she did, never at a loss to encourage others or defend herself. I liked her at once.

"When you have your bonnets off, come down and let us have a chat."

At the top of the stairs we were received by a woman looking like a nurse.

The black gown, white apron and cap, seemed very much like some hospital garb. My eyes lingered on the dress, on her face. It was the loveliest I had ever seen, even now, when some silent pain and age combined had done their utmost to mar it.

The fairness of her skin was dazzling; the eyes, soft grey, were the largest, most dreamy. But the hair—what a treasure to any girl! Whereas she, the owner of it, tucked it out of sight beneath the cap.

It was the brightest golden, glossy and sparkling, a mass of curls and waves, that no brushing would ever brush out.

Her figure was tall and elegant, her carriage good, her step noiseless and gliding. Had I been a man, I should have fallen in love with this woman. I walked

behind her entranced; I longed to hear her speak.

Silently she opened a door, and showed us into a large double-bedded room, apologising in her mistress's name for doing so; but so many guests were invited, that two bedrooms could not be spared.

"This if you please, madame, is a room her ladyship thought you might like to use."

She threw open a door of communication, and showed us a large comfortable sitting-room, with a piano and harp in it.

Madame Marnet murmured some reply.

I was dumb, rendered so by my disappointment. The spell was broken; my siren was no siren when she opened her mouth. Her plebeian extraction declared itself immediately she spoke. The voice was rough, drawly, the pronunciation

difficult and many cornered. There was the total absence of that mellow smoothness, free from all extremes, that belongs alone to those of good birth.

When she had gone, madame remarked:

"Did you notice that woman's voice, Mrs. Sharland? It is most discordant, and she such a striking looking woman too, makes it all the more pitiable, for she can never go unnoticed."

Do what I would, I could not forget her face, and a strong curiosity laid hold on me to learn more of her.

Lady Fane was caressing her dog Alpie.

"I hope you ladies will like your room, and if you care to try any music privately, perhaps you will find the nursery useful."

Madame Marnet was devoted to an old

china bowl, and consequently as deaf as a post, worthy soul.

I answered.

"A very elegant nursery, Lady Fane."

"Ah! it is peculiar, Mrs. Sharland. My late daughter had your rooms, and never used any others. The nursery devoted to the baby became the sitting-room of the sick girl, and we never changed the name. Nothing has been changed. She and her faithful nurse occupied those apartments constantly. You will find Rock useful, Mrs. Sharland. Let her wait upon you and madame; I told her she was to do so."

"Do you refer to the woman who showed us to the rooms? She is very lovely, Lady Fane."

"You think so now—what would you have thought years ago, I wonder? I fell

in love with her, Mrs. Sharland. I knew that my poor child had an antipathy to anyone not pleasant-looking, and I searched for a nice-looking nurse."

"She was your daughter's nurse, then?"

"Yes. I got her from the Children's Hospital, with a very excellent character; she has been with me a great many years, and will, I trust, never leave me. She was devoted to my child, and I can never repay her for her ceaseless care and attention."

"She is remarkable looking to a degree."

"Rachel Rock is altogether a very remarkable woman. But for her education, which is poor, I should suppose her to be a lady. She can read and write, that is all. You will think me romantic when I say, Mrs. Sharland, that I have always had the

impression that my nurse is a woman with a secret, and an important one too. She keeps aloof from the other servants, and has not one friend in the village. Though I have done my utmost to gain her confidence, I have failed. She will not speak of her home or her people, and no one writes to her. Once I was really vexed with her. Her beauty attracted the notice of a lawyer who came to stay at the rectory, and he honourably proposed for her. He spoke to Lord Fane and to me. Rachel was most obstinate, refused to consider the matter, and put herself into such a state, that I came to the conclusion some previous love affair had rendered her bitter."

CHAPTER XVII.

"Liberal he was of soul, and frank of heart;
And to his many friends—all loved him well—
Whate'er he knew or felt he would impart."

THE entrance of Lord Fane interrupted the conversation. It gladdened my heart to see the way his young wife welcomed him. We made no difference; they took hold of each other in perfect confidence and affection.

"Austin, where have you been? not riding all the time?"

"No, dear; not all the time. I have been to the village, seeing that the plat-

form is securely erected for your concerts, and not likely to jeopardise the lives and limbs of these ladies."

The white-headed old gentleman chatted with us till time to prepare for dinner, to which many were invited. The woman Rock offered her assistance, and was eagerly accepted by Madame Marnet. I despaired of that lady's toilet ever being made, and sat watching the maid, who cleverly altered and re-arranged. Never before had a woman so fascinated me as did this ex-nurse of Lady Fane's. I began to agree with her ladyship: Rachel Rock had a secret, and, to my amazement, I discovered I was interested in her and it.

The concert was a success: we professionals acquitted ourselves creditably, and the audience was cheerful, well-dressed, and appreciative. Lady Fane told us that

every seat had been secured for the two following concerts.

Very likely the village people envied Madame Marnet and me, smiling and gay. Our music was sprightly; the composer said "con spirito," and we obeyed, and sang and played as if Fate had smiled at us all the days of our lives. Whether happiness was universal I know not; but hunger was. We all agreed that we wanted supper, and we got it.

Now, amongst the dishes of appetising things that graced the board, there was one of lobsters, in a forest of parsley. It looked most inviting, but a flaw in my constitution prohibiting shell-fish as an article of my diet, I contented myself with looking.

Others partook, amongst them my companion, Madame Marnet. Not for a se-

cond do I suppose she had any idea what the result would be; for I ever found her most considerate towards her fellow creatures. Alas! she punished one of them upon this occasion very severely. The good lady betook herself to her slumbers, and I strove to follow her praiseworthy example, when a terrific volley of snorts expelled that hope. These snorts were followed by a cadence on the nasal notes of the most marvellous compass and execution.

My astonishment was so immense, that I sat up in bed to look if she really did make the sounds. She did. Stretched on her broad back, with her mouth wide open, she snored until the bed shook under her.

How deeply, how sincerely I sympathised with Monsieur Adolph! I could

even forgive him his red nose; for perhaps it did require something stronger than an easy conscience to enable him to sleep through such a hurricane.

The clock struck two. The moon rose late, and was not yet half over the trees; the light was clear and bright.

Can anyone lie in bed awake and think only of the things in the room? I cannot, and not having any interest in the future, my mind naturally enough turned backwards.

I had thought a good deal, more than was advisable, as a sharp pain in my side told me, when a moving light in the adjoining room caused my heart to palpitate still more. I now noticed that the door was ajar. My intention was to rise and shut it. I did not fear robbers; I did not know what I feared. To add to my dis-

comfort Madame Marnet had put out the lamp, and with the exception of a few red embers in the grate, we were in darkness. I reached the door, but what I saw when there did not induce me to shut it, but to open it a little wider, that I might see the better.

The bearer of the light was a woman, habited in night-clothes and barefooted. She stood with her back to me, before an old upright press, the door of which she had opened. Her golden hair streamed far below her waist. For some seconds she was motionless, then swiftly and noiselessly she wheeled round.

It was Rachel Rock.

Her eyes met mine—those dreamy grey eyes, and I expected ,her to speak. She set her candle on the table and breathed heavily, as a person in a deep and troubled

sleep. She was thinking; her hands worked nervously; she muttered, then her voice broke in a harsh whisper:

"Be at peace, mother; poor mother! I did no wrong."

Sleep overpowered her again, but only for a couple of seconds. The tortured brain was not quieted yet. She lifted the candle and walked towards the door, halted mid-way and considered. Again she turned and pointed to the press, whispering:

"It *is* safe, quite safe—till—till the day of judgment."

She backed out, keeping the press in sight, and muttering to herself.

I was rooted to the spot; my nerves were tightened to an extreme—a terror made alive in me that had no equal. I had become possessed of half a secret.

The moon was shining full on to my bed now, and I buried my face in the pillows.

I was roused in the morning by the maid, Rachel Rock.

"Her ladyship's compliments, and will you breakfast in bed, madam?"

I declined. Madame Marnet accepted with joy:

"Nothing I relish so much as having my breakfast in bed once in a way. You are soon dressed, Mrs. Sharland."

I assented. If her brain had been going like mine, she would have been soon dressed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Speeds the early morning light
Through the misty vale of night,
Hill and wood with sounds are ringing,
All that flies is thither winging!"

It was a fine bracing morning; the huntsmen were riding to meet. The baying of the hounds, the call of the horn, reminded me of autumn mornings at Up Holland. How often had I listened, even turned out of my way a trifle to meet the gaily-dressed merry party, and exchange greetings with some!

I must get away, out into the open air, to think alone.

Breakfast was not before half-past nine. It had only just gone eight. I made my way into the lane, declining the company of Alpie. I turned to the left and soon entered upon a vast extent of common, with huge thickets all over it. In a corner of this lonely place, and at the edge of a wood, there was a tiny cottage, evidently occupied by a gamekeeper or woodman. I was just as much alone—as secure from human eye or ear—as if I had been on a mountain. I seated myself on a tree that some gale had twisted up by the roots. A sense of freedom, a temporary liberation from the world and its galling fetters and petty cautions, came upon me, and I revelled in it. I envied the people who lived in the tiny cot, now hidden from my view.

I could be more than happy in it, or another like it—I could be at rest. I

need not struggle to hide my sin, to keep my branded face turned from the light. God knew that I grieved more for the sin that was another's than I did for my own; that I had sought and taken the right path when every atom of my flesh resisted, when every bound of my heart brought me nearer to him who so needed me.

True, I had no more right to be Mr. Lovering's wife than I had to be a saint in Paradise; but I had no more right, and no more power to disconnect our hearts and brains, than one of the brambles on Crag's-foot Common. Whether to heaven or to hell, our souls must go together, for they were one and the same.

When I lifted my head I saw many pheasants hurrying along, pecking the insects. Their glorious plumage reminded me of golden hair, and I recollected the woman

Rock. My brain was cool; I had not imagined anything. It was true, too true, for her, poor creature! Had she a sorrow like mine? What was the secret that lay hidden in that press till the day of judgment? What was it? A fiend tempted me. Ere I quitted that fallen tree I decided to try and discover the secret.

Our time was made pleasant to us by the kindness and courtesy of Lady Fane. Lord Fane had not joined the hunters, and in the afternoon asked me to drive with him.

I assented very willingly, for I saw that in their upright minds there could lurk no coarse suspicion—no sickening insinuation would ever escape their lips.

Once in my lifetime I had the misfortune to be misjudged, and the shame and indignation that overpowered me then is not forgotten.

This narrative is not all fiction, and it may chance to fall into the hands of those who will recognise the facts. I earnestly hope it may. The perfectly true and unvarnished statements contained herein will prevent all contradiction.

Having received one or two small benefits from an elderly bachelor—a man reputed rich, and consequently devoured by a herd of hungry relations, I thought it behoved me to make a return, and decided on a pair of slippers. The next difficulty was the size, and I had no alternative but to ask one of the she-dragons who guarded him and his liberty. Heavens! could I have foreseen to what I was about to expose myself, nothing should have induced me to ask the question. Nature having been stingy respecting this little person's body, she had made amends by bestowing upon

her a remarkable degree of impudence. Impudence that met you at every turn—in words, in voice, in manner, in each twist of the common little countenance. I made my request, and in return received uncle's message—an insulting one. Though rather of a curish nature, I believed he had a touch of manliness about him. And I did not think any man would be so needlessly rude, or so regardless of his own interest, as to lay himself open to the scorn and ridicule of every sensible person. It was a *lie* the young woman told, as her own afterwards delivered opinion more than convinced me.

It conveying to my mind the pleasant assurance that they suspected me of trying to catch uncle, I got out of the house with a smile on my face, and decided that I would go there no more. Poor man!

his was a great life spoiled by a lot of parasites whom he had not the courage to shake off; and in the end he was guilty of a piece of injustice, a cowardly lie, which blighted one life, and stripped his of all honour.

My drive was a charming one. In the old lord I found a genial spirit, and with a brighter face than I had worn for many a day, I went to my room. The last concert was over; we retired to rest.

CHAPTER XIX.

"All are sleeping, weary heart!
Thou, thou only sleepless art!"

I AWOKE without a start. There was the light under the door, clear, steady. I slipped out of bed and took up my position in the doorway.

I was late; she was going, and putting something away inside the press. She made no sound, save a sigh of extreme pain and sadness.

Then, as on her first visit, she walked out, carrying the light carefully. The door

she shut behind her. I determined to seek for the thing I had seen her handle so sacredly.

Perhaps, conscientious reader, you are shocked at my want of principle in trying to pry into another woman's affairs, and above all a woman who was nothing to me, and with whom I could have nothing whatever to do.

Now in this year 1880 I am able to reciprocate your feeling. I am really shocked and ashamed of myself. Then, I experienced no such feeling. I seek not to cast the disgrace of the action upon either angel or devil. I will offer only this defence :

There are times when not even the strongest of us are our own masters, or capable of exercising the cool impartial judgment which at every other moment

of our lives forms our chief quality and characteristic. I could *not* help going to that press. I carried the tall wax light from the toilet-table.

The press contained shelves and drawers, fitted into the curious angles of the carving. It was not so much a useful article of furniture as a valuable and antique one.

Cups and plates, books, toys, the general necessaries for a nursery, were stowed carefully away in it.

The drawers had neatly folded baby's and dolls' clothes in them. I could find nothing calculated to form a subject for secrecy, nothing resembling the object I had seen in her hand.

From my childhood I had never taken kindly to defeats of any sort, and I was vexed at my non-success.

Whatever it was, it was in the right-hand half of that old cupboard, and I would find it. My eyes noticed every handle, every knob.

Ah!—there are four drawers in the middle row on one side, only three in the other. And the short side is at the right hand. Why should there be one drawer short? the space had not been allotted to any other convenience.

The drawer was surely there, if I could only open it.

I brought the candle nearer, and examined the place where the tiny knob was fixed to the others.

I was reduced to hopelessness, for the wood was so dark it was nearly impossible to distinguish anything, when my eye caught sight of a tiny tiny little dot of something black peeping from under a

portion of carving. I touched it—it moved; I pulled it—it lengthened. I held in my hand a piece of twisted purse silk. Now it yielded no more it was all paid out:

I used more force; the drawer opened, and there was what I sought, the dark ball—a brown satin bag rolled tightly up.

I could hear the beating of my heart, and my rapid breathing made the candle flame quiver.

Now that I had succeeded I lost my presence of mind, and the slippery bag glided from my trembling fingers back into its place in the drawer.

It seemed to my fevered fancy alive, and wishful to preserve its secret. I had a repugnance to the thing—I was afraid. I struggled with the feeling; there was a certain fascination about that brown satin

bag that chained me to the spot, and irresistibly inclined my fingers towards it.

I drew it forth once more, set the candle on the table, and opened it.

I beheld a good sized piece of neatly folded paper, and a wedding-ring joined by a faded blue ribbon to a curl of brown hair.

It was a short crisp curl, shorn from a man's head.

I almost shrieked as I touched it—it sent a thrill up my arm to my heart. I was in a hurry now; I opened it, I read, I understood.

I held in my hand the certificate of marriage between Rose Russell and William Lovering.

That paper told all there was to tell. The ink was becoming indistinct, but to my vision it seemed written in blood.

It was sad. They had married young, probably as much in earnest as most people, and they had to learn bitterly that the fatal step had been taken with too little reflection.

Separation had followed. I pitied the girl from my soul. It is usual to hate one's rival—I could not hate mine. My own misery was too fresh in my heart, and I could have sympathised with anyone who had shared my anguish.

Had I been capable of any new feeling in that awful hour, it would have been hatred towards the man who had wrecked the lives and happiness of two women, and yet eluded his own punishment.

I learnt the contents of that paper ere I replaced it; then, with the terrible truth locked in my breast, I laid myself down and listened to the snoring of Madame

Marnet. When dawn appeared, I got up and went out. What happened as the angels opened the windows in heaven and gave daylight to the world I cannot tell; but those who looked through must have known how it was with the woman who lay face downwards in the wood.

The carriage is at the door to take us to the station. Our satisfactory visit is at an end.

I am the last to wish Lady Fane good-bye, and I make a request.

"Lady Fane, I am interested in your late nurse, Rock; should you ever learn anything of her past life, will you tell it to me?"

"I will, Mrs. Sharland."

CHAPTER XX.

"Is there no straight line?
Are all things on the bend for ever and ever?"

Once more in London, my old life returned without an effort. I sang and played at grand houses, and in the streets, and I scoffed not at the smallest donation. I had no need to dread poverty; but though I worked hard, I no longer took the same interest in my success.

Nothing novel or of moment happened until the beginning of May; then I received a sudden surprise.

I was helping to entertain the guests

of Lady Constance Lascelles one Friday night, during the first week in May, when an exclamation of astonishment caused me to look up from my violin, to which I was busily putting a new string.

There stood Mr. Cartland. I knew he could force no explanation from me, but to the friend of my parents I felt it would be unworthy to keep up the deception.

I saw bewilderment on all the faces near as he grasped and wrung my hand. How should I know that he stood high in the opinion of most of the nobility, not only on account of his own superior merits, but also in consequence of having married a very aristocratic lady ?

I had no idea how thin my face was till I wanted to smile. The skin was so tight I could hardly accomplish it.

I took my turn, played well and liberally,

by that I mean that I played it half over again.

Then I accepted Mr. Cartland's proffered arm, and let him lead me into a quiet room, where spring flowers bloomed in health and abundance.

He had grown very grey, but the eyes were still bright and eager. His is one of the most penetrating countenances I know.

He did not speak, but studied my face, my dress, my wedding-ring. His caution was excellent. He had made use of no name, surmising that I possessed one unknown to him.

I would attempt no lie; the truth at any cost must be told.

"You are astonished to meet me here, and thus habited; I see it in your face, Mr. Cartland. Believing you to be still interested in me, I will tell you a part

of my miserable story, and leave you, with your experience, to imagine the remainder.

"I married a man whom I had every reason to think honourable and good, and when a wife of a few weeks, discovered that he had gone through the same ceremony before, and that the first wife was alive. I left him, and came to London to earn an honest living. I do earn it. I am known as Mrs. Sharland."

Genuine sympathy showed in his face, in the kind softly uttered:

"Poor thing! poor thing! You did right to leave the scoundrel, right to keep your own name. I am only puzzled on one point—how any man *could* deceive you."

"Easily. I was very silent, my feelings are condensed; I did not show to others that I cared for him. He was likewise

self-contained and silent. That silence was my ruin, Mr. Cartland. Had I been less guarded, it would have been found out, and someone would doubtless have warned me in time. If he had sought the world round, he could not have found a woman more fitted to enable him to carry out his wicked plan. I was fool enough to imagine he loved as I did, and my love could countenance no lie by either action or word. I did not know then that men are too often only noble in appearance, that they will stoop to, and contrive acts of meanness, that a woman would shrink from. But I know now—I have learnt my lesson well."

"Ah, indeed, poor child, you have suffered! Let not your wrong make you unjust. Injustice is the crime of crimes, an error reserved (in these enlightened

ages) for the brainless and untutored. Perhaps he did not wilfully deceive you. Are you sure the first marriage was valid, and is the woman alive?"

"I am quite sure upon both those points. I have seen the woman, and the certificate."

He started.

"Why did you not come to me in your trouble, and let me fight your battle for you?"

My face grew hot all over.

"Because I could not bear to tell my bitter shame to anyone. Do not name it again, Mr. Cartland; no justice can be done me now."

"Tell me his name?"

"No."

I do not know how the remainder of that night passed. I saw Mr. Cartland

watching me when I chanced to look up. I had given him my address, and he said he would bring Mrs. Cartland.

They did come, and I was out.

Before I had time to return the call, something happened. I received intelligence that I was the possessor of fifteen thousand pounds, and a quantity of family plate.

Mr. Cartland and some other lawyers took an immense deal of trouble to explain it all to me. I listened as politeness required me to do; but I purposely forgot what they said.

I cared nothing for the dead relation, whose property I, as next of kin, inherited. She had never known or cared for me, and was perhaps vexing herself in her coffin to think her successor was so unworthy. I did not feel in the least elated. I must

never venture to make friends, or aspire to a place in society, so it mattered nothing to me how I lived, provided my conscience approved.

On one score, however, I *was* glad. I need not again face the world. The engagements made must be kept; I must also give notice of my retirement.

I would go into the country, and never set my foot in a street again.

If I could only go to Up Holland!

CHAPTER XXI.

"I'd fain be home; with thy dull cares I am jaded."

By degrees I fulfilled my engagements. I parted professionally from excellent Madame Marnet. And yet I lingered in London.

It required an effort to move on, to make any new plans. And I was so tired, how tired I had not known when engaged in the struggle for bread. I must have been in a bad way when I grieved at leaving my crib-like rooms in Moss Street.

I had so little to love, I, who could have

loved so much. Pity me! There is nothing so desolate as an empty heart.

Nearly every day I went to Covent Garden and bought flowers. They were the only remembrance of my home which I permitted myself.

Sometimes I got up early in the June mornings, and astonished the sickly miserable creatures who were creeping back to their dens by running through the deserted streets to a railway station, where I took the first train to some country place, and spent the day in the hay-fields amongst the farmer's rosy children.

Maybe they thought me crazy, for how could they know that every scrap of hay, every bird knew my story?

Nature was the only thing we had in common. I knew he was out in the sunshine, the breeze freshening his cheek like

mine, and I felt calmer, more peaceful, for indulging the fancy.

There was an awful longing upon me, a yearning that racked me, that tore at my heart strings till they felt like to snap and end my troubling. I wanted to go home.

Oh, God! how I wanted to go back to my husband. I saw him penitent, pleading. Heard him calling upon me to return in tones tender and earnest enough to have moved any woman. I could only wrestle with the feeling and pray, and that I did constantly, that I might be deaf, blind, *anything*, so that I did not obey this soul's summons.

I conquered. The strange phantasy faded away after raging in heart and brain two nights and one day.

The voice grew fainter, the features

more indistinct; at last both were gone, and I ate and slept.

My prayer was answered—the cost of that answer you shall know later; either my will was the strongest, or the Lord lost patience and gave me my desire.

Be that as it may the victory was mine, and I counsel all who may read this narrative to take warning by me, and never importune their God.

He knows what is best for us, not alone for to-day and to-morrow, but for ever and ever.

On my return one day from one of my pilgrimages, I found a crested letter on my table. It was brief and elegant, the letter of a lady. It was signed Helen Fane. Rose Russell, *alias* Rachel Rock, *was dead.*

My feeling when I read that letter

stands alone. It had no predecessor, it has had no successor.

There was no rush of joy, no relief from a weight. I was stricken with the real sense of my position. I had been no wife while that woman lived, and her death did not make me one unless he willed it.

He was free to marry any other woman. Should I ask his mercy, entreat him to do me justice? Could I stoop to the man who had deliberately wronged me, tell him of his wife's death, and offer myself for the vacant place? He might scoff at me—there is much brutishness in men! No; I would be silent.

I took up a pen to write to Lady Fane, and laid it aside. I would go to Chislehurst. An idea had occurred to me to take the certificate out of the press. All the power should be vested in me this time.

I could trust myself to use it judiciously. Lady Fane said she was glad to see me, and I knew she was. She liked me; it was just the drawing together of two women of similar dispositions and temper.

"Rock is gone at last, Mrs. Sharland. Since her death I have been greatly exercised in mind concerning her life, poor creature. She had something locked in her breast, that warded off death in a peculiar manner. You have heard it said, very likely, Mrs. Sharland, that anyone with an uneasy conscience dies hard? She seemed to dread and fight with death, not out of fear for her own abiding place, but on account of some person or thing from which she would be separated. She struggled against all weakness in a most painful way, and died as she had lived—silent. Her sole desire was to

preserve her secret; for after sleeping she always buried her face in the pillow, so that we could only hear moans—she inquired very earnestly whether she had spoken. To the very last she was sensible, and exercised the same control over herself and her speech that she had done when in health. It was only when dead, and we lifted her face out of the pillow, that we discovered she had cried—died weeping. Oh! Mrs. Sharland, my heart was so sore."

And this noble and good lady cried for the dead woman, real tears of pity.

I was disappointed. I had hoped she might have revealed something and given me some clue to the reason of the separation. She was not stupid; she must have known her claim as Mr. Lovering's lawful wife, and the position it gave her whenever she chose to avail herself of it.

I couldn't think what threat or argument he had used, what quarrel they could have had, sufficiently strong to make her renounce everything and go out as nurse.

When I went upstairs I slipped into the nursery. It had never been disturbed; the dust lay thick. The bag was there, and with it in my pocket, I bade Lady Fane good-bye. It was not a final parting. She said she should always remember me, because I had taken an interest in poor Rock, and shared her belief respecting her. I might have made amends for her confidence, and told her ladyship how far I had progressed in discovering the dead woman's secret. But I felt that a secret, of whatever nature, that a life had been given to cover, should receive at the hands of the discoverer equal clemency.

I had not to deal with a living but a

dead woman, and let those scoff who will, let those contradict who have never tested the efficacy of the departed; but let no one through bravado or ignorance conclude that the dead are *always* annihilated, and so make a jest of what they held sacred.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Thus thou art laid,
And leavest thy friends;
Thou hast no friend
Who will come to thee."

On my way to the train I visited the churchyard. The grave was easily found. Its freshness suggested mourners somewhere. Loving relatives, whose eyes filled with tears ten times a day, as old ways, affectionate thoughtfulness, acts of kindness, never to be done by the same gentle hands again, passed before their memory. Such joys and sorrows, meetings and

partings, make life. But what can be said of the life that has had to be lived alone—the woman or the man with whom no one has any more to do when the coffin-lid is shut? Little or nothing.

Had I been able, I would have buried the bag with its owner, and let the paper and the bones mix together in dust in that narrow home.

While thinking, I had opened it. There was a second paper. It was neat writing, with a dash of originality about it in parts, obviously copied from some other penmanship, when the writer's hand was formed.

It was like all else in the life—false. Another proof of the care and trouble that had been expended upon making a new existence.

This was what I read:

"It has been revealed to me in a dream that my secret will pass from my keeping into another's. Let that other respect it, lest, when we meet in the judgment hall, I stand up and say, 'Behold Judas's sister!' That the man, whose name is stated with mine in these marriage lines may not be supposed worse than he was, I will give my true and only reason for leaving him. Pride. He got tired of me and my common ways, for though I wished and tried to be a lady, he said I should never be aught but an imitation one. So I left him. He did not want me; I did not want his money, and I loved him too well to mar his life and prevent him having a lady for his wife. I hope he is happy. My sin was in letting my mother think I had gone astray, breaking her heart, and giving way to false pride. I shall be dead and buried,

years perhaps, when this is read, and the reader will ask, who is Rose Russell ?"

Cautious to the last! She had wiped all stain off the man's character; she had supplied not one single atom of unnecessary information while doing so. Had the bag fallen into the hands of a person unacquainted with the previous life of the writer, it would have read like the babble of a lunatic. To me it was perfectly sane and intelligible. I had innocently taken the very place she had vacated. I was the "lady wife," the second and last actor in the sweet little domestic comedy performed for the amusement of the devil.

Now, as before, I felt no anger towards the woman sleeping at my feet. The mysterious silence had come upon her that awaits us all. She had behaved well,

lived and worked well. I ask that she may rest well.

Two days after my visit to Chislehurst, I called upon Madame Marnet. Madame was very pleased to see me. She was full of anxiety and fears for wretched little Adolph, who was suffering from some sort of cold, and drinking quarts of new milk.

In a great arm-chair by the fire he sat, wrapped in what closely resembled his devoted wife's petticoat, smoking cigarettes.

He was, could such a thing have been possible, uglier than ever.

I condoled with him as became me, and he replied through his nose in the most finished style, and managed to squeeze in several compliments, and leer at me behind his good lady's ample back. What a dissolute little hypocrite it was!

There were the dirty fingered cards peeping out of the cut away coat-pocket, ready for "Nap" on the instant.

My vocation as street-singer had disclosed monsieur's haunts to me. I had seen him sprawling on the billiard-table after the balls, heard his yells of rage when he lost at cards.

Ah! poor madame, had you turned that small viper adrift, your banker's book would have been fatter, and a certain snug establishment in D— — Street would have been discovered with the shutters closed, and the milk-cans hanging to the railings some fine morning.

I was almost melted to tears at madame's distress. It was genuine. She knew why I was retiring.

I told her I was going into the country, and when settled I would write. I did

not say I was going back to my old home, but that was the truth.

My turn had come. I could now help those who had befriended me—dear old Peggy and John.

I intended taking a small farm somewhere, and letting John be master, and Peggy knit stockings in the chimney-corner.

I had not written, good souls: they could neither of them read writing, and my business I did not want known all over the parish. Moreover, the master was the very person they would ask to read the letter to them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I know not what came o'er me,
Nor who the counsel gave;
But I must hasten downward,
All with my pilgrim stave."

The carriage was suffocating, the journey had been long, hot and dusty.

A brilliant sunset lit up one half of the heavens, and I decided to walk rather than sit cramped any longer.

So I ordered my luggage to follow, and set off through the fields.

How beautiful all looked—so calm, so peaceful. The corn was ready for carting,

some standing uncut, rustling softly, bowing their ripe yellow heads gracefully, while the larks sang rapturously above.

The meek patient cattle cropped the sunburnt grass; the sheep walked placidly up the hill-side. I was so happy! so happy!

A little child was swinging on a cottage gate by the wayside, eating his supper—a large slice of bread. Such gentleness, such joy was upon me, that I kissed the little Saxon, thinking that perhaps someday——

My pace slackened as I neared Up Holland. The sun was full on the old house, and on two figures in the garden. I stood panting, I could not still my heart. It was Peggy and John. The old man stood leaning on the gate smoking, a look of sorrow and perplexity stamped on his

honest countenance. His wife was plucking lavender, and chanting a Methody hymn.

What strange sense of trouble, what quick and horrible realisation of a loss, something gone, gone, was it that came to me as I looked?

My heart stopped. One little plunge, and it was going as before, at its plodding painful beat.

The house with the sun on it, the old people in the garden, I seemed to see in a dream. The unknown sorrow stood between me and reality.

My voice sounded frightened and hollow as I said: "Good-evening."

John took his pipe from his mouth; our eyes met, and he bellowed:

"Peggy! Peggy! here's Miss Grace comed at last."

They drew me inside the garden, and hung over me in delight, then stood back to look at me.

The old woman's eyes opened wide.

"You're like a ghost, missie, that you are! Aye, but this world is a sorry place for a body to tarry in long."

She threw her apron over her head, and turned away.

"Surely you are glad to see me, John?"

"In course, in course; only Peggy there, she was always for running on two lines at onst, and upsetting everybody like herself. Cheer up, missus, Miss Grace is come instead of that winged angel you was axing the Lord for last night. I'm of opinion that she'll be more use too."

This remark had the effect of drying Peggy's tears, and turning her attention to immediate perplexities.

"You've come in the nick of time maybe, Miss Grace, for we've had neither head nor hand to guide us since the master was took."

"Took!" I repeated.

"Yes, took with madness," replied John, carrying on the conversation, Peggy being busy again with her tears.

"He's gone daft, Miss Grace. I wonder when we shall any on us forget how he was taken. It was down in yon meadow in haying time. He had been a bit queerish off and on for a good while. Some days like a lion raging and cursing, others like a lamb, not caring much what we did, so as we did not bother him, but leave him alone in the fields. He lived outside. Many a night in the orchard or croft. In the morning he'd come to Peggy to the dairy, his clothes dripping,

and have a drink of milk. We dared not speak. At last every bit of sense went clean out of him, and he fell down amongst all the men. The doctors say the sun did it."

The sun gradually lowered itself behind the hills; the birds sang more softly, and I stood speechless in the sweet old garden, hardly for the time less mad than the man they had told me of.

"Where is he?—there?"

I pointed towards the Manor.

"No, not now. They have taken him to a place for mad folks, at Skipton."

"What's the name, Peggy?"

"Abner's Retreat."

"Yes; that's it, and I reckon he's as good as dead—he'll never come out."

"Poor master! He was a grand man. Him as acts for the ladies is letting every-

thing go to ruin. So we are going, Miss Grace. I don't care how soon now, as you be back."

Barrow-wheels sounded; it was my luggage.

For ever—for ever! that whisper in my ear. Mad—mad! My remorse poisoned my life. Now my longing to return those days in June was explained. His spirit was striving to reach mine; his mind was given to me till it became powerless. Had I but hearkened to the message, obeyed the instinct, I might have arrested the ruin. I was punished, justly punished.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Oh, wad some freen the giftie gie us,
To see oursels as ithers see us."

I HAD a fearful illness, and a hard struggle for life. The doctors called it nervous fever. It was remorse. I just lay there, paralysed by grief and horror. I was numb and cold—so cold.

The corn was housed, the woods were red and yellow, ere I got about again.

My illness accounted for the awful change in my appearance.

I told Peggy and John of my sudden

riches, and intention to look out for a small farm.

The first use I made of my recovered strength was to visit the man I loved more than my life—the man who had taken my heart with him into the trackless path of lunacy.

News of my return travelled quickly, also my unexpected fortune.

The Miss Loverings called. I did not see them. Mr. Cartland came and stayed several days with me. He made me go out with him; gave me, as it were, a second introduction to the world. To him I told all. No punishment greater than God had sent could ever come upon the erring man; no restitution could be exacted from him who had nothing in common with the world, not even a thought. It was like speaking of the dead.

All the sympathy a man could give he gave me, also unexpected help. He knew Dr. Abner, of the private asylum at Skipton, and obtained for me permission to see Mr. Lovering. Whether he confided my story to Dr. Abner I know not, and never inquired.

To see him, when my longing grew intolerable, formed my chief desire. It brought back to my mind the long weary time before he spoke, before I dared show him I loved him. I used to say, "Say good-bye to me kindly, sir," and he did it.

He little knew how my heart ached in those days, how his silence crushed the spirit within me. God forgive him, and others who mercilessly use their power!

I paid my first visit with Mr. Cartland, and made the acquaintanc of Dr. Abner.

The Retreat was enclosed in spacious grounds, and each patient had his or her own rooms. It was one of those expensive establishments where afflictions are softened to those who can pay. The tenderest sensibilities could not have been shocked by anything seen at the Abner Retreat. Every consideration was shown to the patient, all suitable recreations permitted. The only thing denied was liberty.

The doctor was a small thin man with the most beautifully-shaped hands and feet. He was playing with his children when we arrived, and his merry laugh echoed through the rooms. No depression hung over him or the place, and no one would have supposed they were in an asylum.

"Can you see Mr. Lovering, madam?

Certainly you can. He was walking in the garden not half an hour ago. He is a clever fellow, Cartland, a man of genius."

He rang a bell.

"Send Maxwell here," said he to the man who answered.

While we were waiting the arrival of Maxwell, I asked Dr. Abner a question that was of much moment to me.

"Dr. Abner, is Mr. Lovering's memory quite impaired? Does he recognise his friends?"

"His sisters have been the only people to come so far, and he burst out laughing in their faces and ridiculed them. He did not remember them. His memory is excellent concerning some matters; but those are connected with his earlier days. Are you afraid he may recognise you?"

"I am not afraid for myself, but for him. Would a shock do him harm?"

"My dear lady, you could not give him a shock. He has no mind to shock. You are observant; you must have noticed a daze over him at times. Perhaps in the middle of a conversation a puzzled, vacant expression?"

"I did, but supposed he was lost in thought."

"He was lost in space—the brain had lost its grasp then."

"Dr. Abner, you do not attribute his loss of reason to any trouble, any disappointment?"

"To speak candidly and unprofessionally, I do not. Had all his wishes been gratified, this calamity might have been postponed. Fretting, as men of his temperament will fret, would probably bring it on earlier.

A steady, strong intellect constantly at his service would have supported him, induced him by force of example to indulge in no precarious flights of fancy. But it is my opinion that he has always been shaky. His is the most restless, brilliant intellect, and its power and richness has been its ruin. Had he possessed but a quarter of it he would have been a renowned genius. It was too much for him; he could not govern it, and it has just dashed itself to pieces. He ought to have married; many a man is kept out of a mad-house by his wife. What do you say to that, Cartland?"

"That it is a miserable truth. We are but poor creatures left to ourselves."

The entrance of Maxwell stopped the conversation.

"Maxwell, how is Mr. Lovering to-day?"

"Very well, sir, and very busy. He is just finishing a long address to tenant farmers, which he purposes reading at the next Royal Agricultural meeting," replied the man with perfect gravity.

"Ah!" retorted the doctor, "and before the last page is dry he will be wandering about my fields, composing a scheme to be laid before Beaconsfield, to facilitate drainage and the growth of wheat. He tells me he has had an interview with the noble earl. I should think he would astonish him. We are coming to see Mr. Lovering, Maxwell."

My heart failed me when we neared the door, and I got behind Mr. Cartland.

"Look!" said my good friend.

Mr. Lovering was standing at the end window with his hat tilted over his brows, and his arms hooked back over his stick in

the old attitude. He looked much as usual, as I had seen him so often standing in his fields. God was good in not letting the shattered mind blemish the body, or my heart must have broken. I blamed myself for the desolation that had come upon him. Had I done what was clearly intended that I should do, pocketed my pride, come back when I knew of his wife's death, told him, and left it to him to decide what we were to be to each other in future, I might have arrested the ruin. The doctor was speaking to him, and I could hear the deep swelling tones and see the flash of white teeth against the red lips.

"Yes, you are right," replied my husband, "you know what Burns says:

> "'O wad some freen the giftie gie us
> To see oursels as ithers see us.'"

I could endure no more. My eyes gushed over. My memory, fiendishly prompted, reproduced the scene in my room one night at Up Holland, when he had eluded the vigilance of his relatives, and come to see his lonely tenant. He had quoted the same passage to me, and now that I should hear no more the quick utterance and odd opinions, I recollected almost every word he had spoken to me.

I went home. It was over; my life had ended for me.

I returned the Miss Loverings' call one wintry day. No one named him whose absence cast a gloom over everything connected with the place. The house seemed deserted, cold, dark, depressing. The old ladies huddled fearfully in one small sitting-room, under the rule of presuming

domestics. I did not stay long. All they had done for me was to knock down my idol and break it.

My next attempt was to carry out an idea. I was attached to Up Holland. The old place had associations that could never creep round any other home, and I felt that to tend what he had cared for would sweeten my life to me if anything could.

I applied for the house and farm, and got it. John was delighted. The Leetes were kind, true friends; they are so still.

Trouble had not forgotten to knock at their door. "A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind." My sympathies had always been alive in that quarter, and when I saw how unflinchingly Mary stood up beside her old father, and offered her young shoulders for the weight of care and

disappointment that whitened his locks, and dimmed his eyes, my compassion increased. Duty and affection are expected from a child, but the child who beseeches a share of another's care when scarcely able to carry her own portion is a noble child, a grand woman.

Mr. Leete's sons had all gone wrong, and betaken themselves to strange cities and lands. This necessary move had, however, not been made until a considerable difference had been effected in Mr. Leete's fortune. This Mary vowed she cared not a straw about. A few years and they would retrieve some of it.

"Then, if not fretting for the money, may I inquire what you are fretting about, Mary?"

She laid down the stocking and lifted her honest eyes to mine. We were in the

pleasant dining-room, and the noise of the mill could be heard through the open window. I had gone over to spend the day, as I so often did, and drove home in my pony-cart in the evening. My farming scheme answered; things throve under the management of John and myself; and Miss Sharland, of Up Holland Farm, was well known.

"How much do you know, Grace?" she asked.

"I know nothing—I only guess."

"Then papa has said nothing?"

"Nothing."

A twinkle of humour came into her eyes.

"Grace, I must have hidden my talent under a bushel, and I am being punished for so doing. Surely my calling in life was that of an actress. Anyway, I have managed to hoodwink both you and papa."

"To deceive me is no difficult matter, Mary. I am naturally unsuspicious, and my brains will never now lend themselves to any great discovery. It takes me all my time to keep things going equally all round. But do not be too proud of yourself, for though I do not know the cause of your trouble, I perceive you have one. Tell it me."

"I will. You know Mr. Singlehurst?"

"Yes."

"Did it ever occur to you that he was more than a friend to me?"

"No. Why, Mary?"

The lips quivered, but the eyes remained steady, showing the unwavering mind, the firm will whenever exerted. Presently the piteous tremble that only a really loving woman's lips ever know passed away, and gave place to a sneer.

"No doubt you, like every other person in the parish, consider Walter Singlehurst a good, honourable man, or, as he would term it—*righteous*. How I detest that phrase! The last time he sent a couple of ducks here, he, in his note to me, said there was no one to whom he had a more righteous pleasure in giving them. But you shall hear of what order his righteousness is, then you can judge for yourself. It is nearly three years since he first commenced to make love to me, in a cautious manner, I own, but there was no misunderstanding his motive. He threw out many hints, even going the length of consulting me as to whether I should like to live in Wales. Perhaps he expected me to throw myself in his arms, and say: 'Anywhere with you, dearest Walter.' Being the reverse of impulsive, I did not do it, but re-

sponded as became a decent young woman of my age and position. I fancy papa wondered what brought him so often. He came every week, and stayed till after nine, always sitting with me while papa went to lock up the mill for the night. Last Christmas but one he cooled, and I was vexed. My vexation increased when he positively avoided me, and I saw nothing of him for nearly three months. I began to prepare my mind for the worst, and hard enough I found it, beset by so many worries, including Lucy's illness. I was sitting working one evening in May when I saw him coming up the garden. I used to smile and kiss my hand; this evening I took no notice. The hardening process I had prescribed for myself was beginning to tell. He came in, reserved, cross. After a few disjointed scraps of conversation, he said:

"'So I suppose you have changed your mind?'

"Stung into resentment, I echoed:

"'Yes, I have changed my mind.'

"'And you believe it will be better?'

"'I have every reason to think so.'

"'Ah, very well, I understand. I have done wrong, I should have spoken sooner; I have waited too long. I am very glad you have told me; one place will do for me to end my days in now as well as another.'

"I was tongue-tied, and very sorry for what I had said. He went. When I had time to reflect I was ashamed of the untruth I had uttered, for I had *not* changed my mind. But when he came I would explain. He did not come. Now, to make a mistake everyone is liable, but to persist in that mistake is peculiar only to some,

and such people are contemptible cowards. I wrote. I expressed myself sorry, and I asked him to forgive and forget the circumstance. I said that trouble had numbed me, but that to alter would take all the light out of my life. You are surprised, Grace? Yes; I humbled myself—I owned my fault—in a measure, I placed myself at his mercy. You will be more astonished when I say that I am intensely proud of that letter. There was nothing silly in it, but as I understand such matters, something very honourable. You perceive my intentions were honest—I was in earnest. He took no notice of the letter; he did not come. When at last he did, it was Sunday, and papa was at home. Gradually he resumed his visits, and though his manner was perhaps a trifle cold, I did not suppose he was cherishing anger

against me. One Saturday in September papa went to some show, and in the evening Mr. Singlehurst came. He commenced to speak of the wickedness of a woman deceiving a man, but that after three months a man got over such treatment, and then amused himself, as he was doing. He had kept away of late because people talked; but 'if they wait long enough they will find out there was no cause for their chatter.' He looked at me, temper and revenge gleaming in his eyes. I was silent, and presently asked him what he thought of the new organist, and did not encourage him to prolong his visit. What he had heard I cannot say.

"He came again, and treated me to some more merciful and manly taunts, giving me to understand that he was an injured man, and I a very hard and de-

ceitful woman. I resolved that, come what might, I would silence him. To be talked to is bearable, to be talked *at* is unbearable.

"The only thing I could recollect in the least likely to have vexed him was the conversation that spring evening, and for that hasty speech, though duly provoked, I had made timely and ample amends. The next time he came I was ready; I told him how objectionable his remarks had been, and that whatever he had heard, I had said nothing to give rise to them. I recalled my untruthful statement which had obliged me to write that letter. Had he received the letter?

"'Yes.'

"'Had he understood it?'

"'Perfectly; but what of that now? *He*,' with a superior smile, '*never* looked

back. He could recollect nothing of the affair—had *no* idea to what I alluded ; that I should not allow such things to annoy me.'

"Grace, he looked me straight in the face, and in a scoffing tone as good as told me I was either a liar or a lunatic. I bade him good-bye ; attended him politely to the door. I saw misgiving in his eye. He had played his trump card and lost. I was standing upright, composed, and dry-eyed, when I closed the door upon his majestic form. I suffered — something, how much is of no importance. At the end of three weeks he came, under pretence of telling papa a small matter, in reality to see how I was supporting my life, robbed of his hypocritical devotion. He found me neither hollow-cheeked nor melancholy, undisposed for either suicide or a convent.

I was getting along nicely, and fighting my sorrow furiously and silently. I was aware that the keenest torture I could inflict upon him was a brave spirit and a cheerful countenance. I betrayed no displeasure; I was the essence of gracious politeness. A week after his call I made a little party, and invited him and two of his sisters. He arrived *punctually* at eight o'clock, in a tail coat, and with his hair parted down the back. I was most engaging, most affectionate to those stupid girls, and between rage and disappointment, the righteous man was well-nigh rent in twain. I have been to their house, they have been here again. I have written to him, nice friendly letters, when papa had need for me to do so, though his eldest sister did maliciously inform me that she knew more about Mr. Single-

hurst's letters than he did himself. Now, Grace, what do you think of my acting?"

"Think; why, that you must pay a good price for it, Mary; and I advise you to make it up with him. You may live to hate your own strength of will as I have done. You will never know anything so bitter as a lost true love."

Mary drew a long breath.

"Possibly, but I am not sure that his was true. He denied it, Grace, and he said he had been *amusing* himself. A woman can hardly be expected to appreciate such candour."

"Lovers always have tiffs, Mary."

"I know nothing about them; this is my solitary experience, and I can only remark that if his amusement has been anything in proportion to my misery, we shall never one forget the other. Mean-

while I shall put the tea to draw, and not wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at."

* * * *

Four years ago the wind brought me a message.

Dawn is creeping round slowly, it is early spring. The wind is singing gently amongst the trees, the ducks are seeking the pond, quacking as they go. I awake. I am alone in the room, as far as I can see; yet a strange consciousness of someone near makes my dull heart bestir itself. I sit up and listen. The wind lifts the leaves; they knock gently at the window, and a voice says:

"Grace, it is I."

Just those four words. He had not forgotten.

* * * *

November 5th.—John and Peggy are sitting in the kitchen. All the beasts are housed and fed. It is a bitter night: the moon rose blood-red over the ice-bound pond three hours ago. It is very still. Is the last silence much greater? Let us forgive one another.

> "I pledge you in this cup of grief,
> Where floats the fennel's bitter leaf!
> The battle of our life is brief,
> The alarm, the struggle, the relief—
> Then sleep we side by side."

THE END.

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